The New Criterion

January 1993

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *January 1993*

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Notes & Comments: January 1993

Mrs. Cheney's departure

The recent announcement that Lynne V. Cheney, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, intended to step down on January 20, sixteen months before the end of her term, was an occasion for sadness and trepidation. It was an occasion for sadness because in the six and a half years that she led the Endowment, Mrs. Cheney distinguished herself as a courageous and effective spokesman for the great principles of humanistic education. At a time when the humanities have been besieged by ideologues seeking to transform culture into a referendum on political correctness, Mrs. Cheney emerged as a staunch defender of the ideals of disinterested scholarship, objectivity, and the pursuit of truth for its own sake. In the face of unremitting abuse from the academic establishment, she consistently dared to criticize the demand that education be turned into a forum for political indoctrination.

Our sadness at the near prospect of Mrs. Cheney's departure is compounded by the recognition that, even in the best of times, she would be most difficult to replace. Our trepidation is sparked by the realization that these are far from the best of times. The culture wars of the 1980s are intensifying as we settle into the 1990s. The institutionalization of cultural radicalism that marked the 1980s has succeeded to an unprecedented degree, not only in colleges and universities, but also in scholarly organizations, museums, the media, and even in grammar schools. Subjects that even a few years ago would have been widely considered beyond the pale are now routine items on the educational and cultural agenda. There can no longer be any doubt that the diversity police regard every capitulation as a basis for ever more outrageous demands.

Given the temper of the times, it is hardly surprising that news of Mrs. Cheney's departure should have been cause for celebration among the cultural radicals who now control many of our leading educational institutions. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, for example—which like many left-wing publications has lately made a cottage industry out of excoriating Mrs. Cheney and other critics of academic radicalism—could barely contain its glee at the announcement of her planned departure. "Backers of traditional curriculum disappointed," screamed a subhead to its report on the news; "liberals relieved."

Liberals? Well, "liberals" such as Stanley Katz, president of the American Council of Learned Societies. Mr. Katz, a voluble proponent of academic trendiness wherever it

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may be found, declared in the *Chronicle* that Mrs. Cheney was "just a great propagandist" and complained that she "packed her advisory council with critics of multiculturalism and women's studies." About the latter, anyway, he was entirely correct, even if "packed" is not exactly the *mot juste*. In her letter of resignation, Mrs. Cheney insisted that "political agendas should never take the place of the pursuit of truth as the object of education." This was a conviction that she strove to embody in the Endowment's grant-making policies, much to the chagrin of radical academics and functionaries such as Mr. Katz. It tells us a great deal about the current cultural scene that, because she fought against obscurantism and the importation of radical politics into the curriculum, Mrs. Cheney was branded a right-wing ideologue by *bien pensants* academics and journalists.

In fact, the *Chronicle* got it wrong. "Backers of traditional curriculum" were indeed disappointed by the announcement of Mrs. Cheney's departure; but it is they, not the radicals clamoring for multiculturalism, "gender studies," and the rewriting of history, who are the true liberals today. It is they who are defending such traditional liberal ideals as academic freedom, scholarly integrity, and the disinterested search for truth. *Pace* Mr. Katz, Mrs. Cheney imbued the activities of the Endowment with an intellectual dignity and openness to debate that have all but vanished on many college campuses in this country. Jonathan Yardley, writing recently in *The Washington Post*, aptly summed up the importance of her stewardship:

> What Cheney understood from the hour she took office is that at this moment in history the greatest threat to free speech at university campuses and other intellectual institutions comes not from the right, as in the past, but from the left. The presence within humanities departments of limousine Marxists, radical feminists and other narrow-minded, bellicose ideologues of the left has been the late-20th-century equivalent of mid-century's McCarthyism; Cheney has resisted these people eloquently and courageously, standing up for the 'liberal tradition' against those who, having been reared in it, now seek to demolish it from within.

The National Endowment for the Humanities was one of the few major cultural institutions in the United States that had not capitulated to the ideology of multiculturalism. With the departure of Mrs. Cheney, that last bulwark against cultural radicalism is likely to crumble, especially since those lobbying on behalf of the academic establishment are the only voices being heard by those now preparing to dispense patronage in Washington.

Exactly what are those voices demanding? A "transition report" prepared for President-elect Bill Clinton on the future of the the other Endowment, the National Endowment for the Arts, gives us a preview of coming attractions. Written by the radical art historian Maurice Berger "in cooperation with" the art dealer Ronald Feldman, this manifesto has been making the rounds in New York, looking for supporting signatures. The three-page document is a veritable compendium of radical clichés. Its concluding proposal summarizes the approach to culture we can expect to find officially sanctioned and supported in the future. Invoking the talisman of "diversity," Mr. Berger suggests that "both in the staffing and in the programming of the NEA . . . arts institutions should be persuaded to better represent the cultural diversity of America, including the work of women, African-Americans, Native-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, ethnic and religious groups, gay men and lesbians, and the economically disadvantaged." In other words, politics, not artistic merit, is to be the deciding qualification for support by the National Endowment for the Arts. We can, alas, expect analogous deformations at the Humanities Endowment. Lynne Cheney's departure will indubitably be a great loss for

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the NEH. It also promises to be emblematic of the cultural debacle now upon us.

Lincoln Center (continued)

Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc., is a monument to the public cultural world of the late 1950s and the early 1960s. That world was marked by an urge to build great structures—preferably several great structures—devoted to different art forms linked together, so that the arts might in some way "cross-fertilize" one another. In addition, the very phrase "performing arts" signified a new and more rigid separation between artistic creation, still presumably to be carried on in a loft or garret, and artistic performance, a genre requiring deluxe and glittering surroundings.

And so Lincoln Center, completed in the 1960s, now houses the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, the New York City Ballet, the New York City Opera, the Juilliard School, the Lincoln Center Theater, the Film Society, the Chamber Music Society, an embryonic jazz program, and the Library for the Performing Arts. The scale of operations of these constituents is mostly vast, the bustle and the hype are great, and the cross-fertilization, it seems, is nil. But there is something more to Lincoln Center than its constituents, namely its own production activities, which include the long-lived Mostly Mozart Festival, the Great Performers concert series, and Serious Fun, an attempt to tap a new, young audience for avant-garde presentations. Now Lincoln Center, in its producing capacity, is evermore worried about, and working on, its relevance to what it perceives as changed cultural circumstances. On this reading, culture is now multicultural, art is—or should be—diverse, audiences are aging, the young aren't coming, and government support is drying up. A new Director of Programming, Jane Moss, has been appointed to bring Lincoln Center into the new age, and, by implication, to shake up Lincoln Center's staid, dead white European male image rather more than a bit. It is significant that Moss's experience, according to an interview she gave *The New York Times*'s Edward Rothstein at the beginning of December, is not in music; "[S]he has never worked as head of programming for any institution and has never booked an artist . . . her experience is not primarily in music either." What the interview tells us of her intentions in programming is not terribly informative: she is "interested in the kind of programming created by the World Music Institute: the presentation of accomplished folk- and art-music performances from different countries." In line with the trend in music presentation to substitute talks for sounds, she is also interested "in sponsoring lectures and seminars in which issues are debated."

But two other quotations, though they are of the most generalized character, do sound a warning note for those who remember that Lincoln Center was in the main founded to present high art, even if that presentation was to be in glitzy surroundings. In the first quotation, Moss seems to have given up any faith in the existence of a reasonably large, educated audience for great music: "The days of 2,500 people," she remarks, "coming to Avery Fisher Hall, all with a similar level of knowledge, passion, and commitment—I think those days are over." And then, slightly later in the interview, she goes on to question what one had thought was the ultimate reason for Lincoln Center's existence—art itself: "The notion," she says, "that art and truth and beauty in and of themselves are of inherent value and need to be supported—I think those days are gone."

It is difficult not to read these self-confident words as a verdict not just on Lincoln Center but on what we think of as some of the greatest achievements of Western civilization. Moss's words about the inherent value

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of art and truth and beauty both echo and stand in direct contradiction to Keats's in the closing lines of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

> When old age shall this generation waste,
> Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
> Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
> "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Doubtless the twentieth century has been unkind to Keats's noble vision. Still, it is chilling to realize that what were for Keats the culminating values of art are now to be so blithely jettisoned by those in charge of our great cultural institutions. In the place of such values we find such expediencies as audience interest, financial viability, and relevance to some airy notion of a more egalitarian world. That Moss should be so quick to dispense with the idea that art and beauty are "in and of themselves of inherent value and need to be supported" is bad enough: it bespeaks a troubling commercial philistinism. That she includes truth in her pantheon of dispensable values is genuinely appalling, and suggests that where truth is discounted, politics will fill the void.

The questions raised by Moss's reflections go far beyond the fortunes of Lincoln Center. They are the more fundamental questions: why art, why beauty, and, above all, why truth? One does not know as yet just what Moss will do in her new post; one fervently hopes that she will dismiss her own words as the unwelcome fruit of inexperience, and promptly forget them. Civilization, after all, was not born in order to be killed at Lincoln Center.

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Mary McCarthy & company

by Hilton Kramer

What is missing is a certain largeness of mind, an amplitude of style, the mantle of a calling, a sense of historical dignity.
—Mary McCarthy, in "The Vassar Girl," 1951

When a writer with a large reputation and a strong public personality quits the scene after many years in the limelight, there inevitably follows a period of uncertainty in which posterity—the cruellest of all critics—has not yet determined its verdict, and briefs for the defense are given every opportunity to dominate the discussion. The eulogies sound the appropriate note of piety and praise; the remaining manuscripts, ceremoniously augmented by glowing testimonials, are rushed into print; the favor of a friendly assessment is more or less assured; and the author's name is everywhere draped in respectful mourning. The literary world makes its obeisances to one of its own, and even the writer's enemies refrain from casting doubt upon the manufacture of encomia.

Nowadays, moreover, there is likely to be added to this chorus of acclaim a promptly produced biography of the subject as well, for today's biographers gather their materials long before the body is buried and are no longer deterred by a sense of delicacy about the feelings of the immediate survivors. It might even be said that the timely publication of such a biography, precisely because it is certain to raise even more questions than it answers, is likely to bring this period of respectful mourning to a close. For biography, especially as it is practiced today, is a genre that specializes in laying bare its subject's imperfections and delinquencies, and it is these, rather than the tale of achievement that is the ostensible *raison d'être* of such books, that commands attention. Biography of this kind, no matter how respectful its intention, is therefore bound to clear the air of incense and restore its subject to the realm of reasonable debate.

In the case of Mary McCarthy, who died in 1989 at the age of seventy-seven, the customary rituals have all been lavishly observed. Even before her death, she had been hailed as America's "First Lady of Letters," quite as if this were an official position in our national cultural life that had been owed to her. It hardly mattered that McCarthy had spent a lifetime ridiculing such honors, or that the national cultural life of which she was now to be thought an ornament was something she held in very low esteem. She embraced her elevation with an evident sense of vindication—the bad girl of American letters, who had always been forgiven her misdeeds, had again gotten away with it this one last time—and this feeling of vindication, which had an important political dimension to it, was clearly shared by her many admirers. So it came as no surprise that McCarthy's passing would bring an amplification of a sentiment so patently at odds with the character of her writing and the spirit of her temperament, and she would be presented to us in retrospect as a paragon of

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literary probity, intellectual independence, and political sagacity.

Now the expected biography has appeared with a promptitude that is all the more remarkable because of its exorbitant length. Carol Brightman's *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World* is by no means the longest book of its kind to come off the press in recent years, but it does run to some seven hundred pages, which is rather a lot about a writer who never produced a single major work.[1] For Ms. Brightman, however, McCarthy is clearly more interesting as a figure of history than as a writer per se. This no doubt has a good deal to do with the specific historical circumstances under which the biographer first met her subject. It was during the Vietnam War, and Ms. Brightman, as she says, "had become a foot soldier in the revolution"—that is, a writer-activist in the antiwar movement. "I had left a fledgling career as a film and book reviewer to start an antiwar magazine, *Viet-Report*," she writes, and it was in this capacity that she was introduced to McCarthy in 1967 by Robert Silvers, the editor of *The New York Review of Books*. McCarthy was about to leave for Hanoi on a political reporting assignment for the *Review*, and Ms. Brightman, who had just returned from Hanoi, was brought in to advise "the famous author of *The Group*" on what she would find there. *Hanoi*, the book that resulted from that political pilgrimage, idealized the Vietnamese Communists in the most sentimental fellow-traveling fashion, characterizing their regime as a "virtuous tyranny" to be admired, and castigated both the American prisoners-of-war and America itself with that mixture of snobbery, condescension, and self-aggrandizement McCarthy had perfected thirty years earlier in her caustic reviews of lousy Broadway plays. It was the most shameful of all her books, and proved to be distasteful even to her buddies on the Left—even, alas, to Dwight Macdonald, who had a strong stomach for such political nonsense.

It should be understood, then, that it is the bond once established between Ms. Brightman and her subject in that halcyon moment of radical solidarity that provides the basic historical *donnée* from which *Writing Dangerously* is written. Which is to say, it is a book about an earlier generation (what Ms. Brightman calls "the granddaddy generation") of the American intellectual Left written by a member of the Sixties radical Left who, though still loyal to the ethos of the Left, is now trying to make sense of the debacle that has overtaken its most cherished articles of belief and left its sacred ideology in ruins. In this respect, the book that *Writing Dangerously* most closely resembles is Eleanor Langer's *Josephine Herbst* (1984), an earlier attempt on the part of a disaffected Sixties radical to look for answers as well as absolution in the failures of her predecessors.[2]

There are great differences, of course, between the two books and the two subjects. Josie Herbst was a Stalinist, and McCarthy was not (though she gave a good impersonation of one in *Hanoi*). Herbst would never attack the Communists in public, however much she criticized them in private, whereas McCarthy was (shall we say?) more adaptable to the needs of the moment, allying herself with the anti-Communists and the anti-anti-Communists according to the shifting fortunes of the radical Left and her own career. *Josephine Herbst* is therefore the story of a failed life as well as a failed ideology, whereas *Writing Dangerously* is a tale of worldly success in which the heroine survives every misfortune—a wretched childhood, an army of discarded lovers, three disastrous marriages, bad books, political misadventures, and even a famous law suit—to achieve in the end both literary fame and fortune and bourgeois marital bliss. There is also another important difference: whereas Josie Herbst

1 *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World*, by Carol Brightman; Clarkson Potter, 714 pages, $30.

2 See "Who Was Josephine Herbst?" in the September 1984 issue of *The New Criterion*.

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was the kind of radical who lost everything as a result of her actions and her beliefs, McCarthy was always the kind of smart, Left-leaning opportunist who managed to turn every personal attachment and every shift in the *Zeitgeist* to her own advantage. She had a knack for escaping the wreckage unscathed.

It is for this reason, by the way, that the title of Ms. Brightman's biography—*Writing Dangerously*—strikes me as ridiculous, for McCarthy's were the kind of "risks" that, in life as well as in literature, always advanced her career. Indeed, the more pain she inflicted by means of her pen, the more she betrayed her friends, her lovers, and her husbands, the more praise she reaped in the process. (*Hanoi* was virtually the only exception.) In a century in which many writers better than Mary McCarthy have put themselves in real danger through their writing—the danger of poverty, the gulag, and even death—it demeans the whole idea of literary risk to place her in their company, and it is a measure of Ms. Brightman's identification with her subject and what may fairly be described as her infatuation with the glamour of McCarthy's career that she does not seem to understand this. On this issue, as on others—McCarthy's three failed marriages, for example, and the writings on Vietnam—she lapses into the role of "authorized" biographer, suspending judgment in favor of her subject. As Ms. Brightman acknowledges herself, she felt "the tug of McCarthy's personality" in the interviews that were conducted with her subject—eighteen in all—and the sway of that personality makes itself felt on every page of the book, which is not always to the book's advantage.

Still, it is Ms. Brightman herself who introduces the theme of failure in writing about McCarthy and her generation of New York intellectuals. Although she speaks admiringly of this generation as "the last one to sustain an imaginative and critical involvement with the world around it"—which means, I suppose, that she still approves of what they made of their politics—she adds that "I wanted to understand how and why its writers pulled back from their early promise." I think she is right about the unfulfilled promise of that generation, which is what we mean by failure, but we don't actually hear much more about it in *Writing Dangerously*, which tends in the course of its lengthy narrative to dissolve into a series of vivid vignettes of personalities, political debates, literary projects, love affairs, publishing arrangements, and intellectual social life, not to mention the sex life of McCarthy herself, without ever coming to grips with the nature of the "promise" or the reasons for its failure.

To account for this omission, which leaves a moral and intellectual void at the center of Ms. Brightman's very long book, it is necessary to examine exactly what she means when she speaks so approvingly of the "imaginative and critical involvement with the world" that she attributes to McCarthy's generation of New York intellectuals. McCarthy herself was never a leader in the intellectual and political initiatives of that generation. She took her cues from the men in her life—lovers, mentors, colleagues—who were themselves deeply divided in their attitude toward the world they wished to engage in their work. While on the one had they tended to be rebels of the Left who were fiercely critical of American society and bourgeois life, they were also, on the other, ambitious to secure a place of preferment in the American cultural establishment they looked down upon with a good deal of intellectual scorn and political distaste. In the beginning—that is, in the Thirties, and to a lesser extent in the Forties—the greatest obstacle to their success was their opposition to Stalinism, which in its cultural manifestations dominated the literary world that held the keys to preferment. Stalinism was, in its literary and artistic standards, philistine and middlebrow, whereas the writers in *Partisan Review*, the principal organ of the anti-Stalinist Left, were ferociously highbrow. McCarthy herself made her literary debut as the drama critic of *Partisan Review* by playing—and brilliantly, too

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—the highbrow scourge of a Broadway theater still firmly tethered to the standards of Stalinist philistinism.

What changed all this, oddly enough, was the Cold War. It was the Cold War that gave this generation of New York intellectuals —McCarthy included—its entrée to the larger cultural stage that it both coveted and condescended to. Suddenly there were jobs in universities, in publishing, and in the mainstream media that had formerly been closed to writers of their persuasion. There were fellowships, subsidies, conferences, contracts, and the other emoluments of an established intellectual class. The irony was, of course, that the New York intellectuals now qualified for the mainstream because of their politics—that is, their anti-Stalinism—at the very moment when the vicissitudes of the political situation—the military threat coming from the Soviet Union—greatly diminished their radical commitment. It was discovered that in an increasingly perilous world, the United States could no longer be considered the principal enemy and might even be worth defending against the libels and slanders of the European—especially the French—Left, which placed itself in militant opposition to American interests.

As was her custom in such matters, McCarthy enthusiastically joined in this reversal of opinion, writing essays on "America the Beautiful" and "Mlle. Gulliver en Amérique" (an attack on Simone de Beauvoir's criticism of America) that some readers believed marked a "conservative" turn in her thinking. Later on, of course, when a radical critique of America was once again the intellectual fashion of the Left, she returned to the subject with a far more savage criticism of America than "Mlle. Gulliver" had ever been able to muster. McCarthy had become, so to speak, a political pen for all seasons.

What has to be understood about the political demeanor of the New York intellectuals in the heyday of the Cold War was that they were never entirely comfortable in the support they rendered to—and received from—the United States in its struggle with the Soviet Union. While fully availing themselves of the benefits of their new position, they could never really give up the idea that political virtue was still in some sense the preserve of the radical Left. They remained, emotionally even more than intellectually, secret believers in the radical dream. This made them extremely touchy about and indeed vulnerable to attacks from the Left —especially those of Norman Mailer, Harold Rosenberg, Irving Howe, et al.—which they publicly scorned but which privately caused them a lot of grief. I saw a good deal of Philip Rahv in the Fifties, when I first began writing for *Partisan Review*, and I was always struck by the great gap that separated his private conversation from his public pronouncements on these matters. He had a morbid fear of being nailed as a renegade.

This split came to be symbolized for me in what was said privately about Lionel Trilling. No writer was more highly esteemed by the readers of *Partisan Review* than Trilling was in the Fifties. Yet his appearances in the magazine were frequently accompanied by a campaign of disparagement that was conducted behind the back, and often by the very people who were publishing him in the magazine. Trilling was seen to have completely severed his ties with the radical ethos. He was considered too bourgeois, too respectable, too square, too "conservative," yet because *Partisan Review* seemed to need him, he could not be expelled from its pages without causing a scandal that would have cost *PR* some of its support. Some of this anti-Trilling sentiment was publicly expressed by Delmore Schwartz, Harold Rosenberg, and Irving Howe, but the really vicious talk was carried on *sotto voce* in a way that absolved its speakers from responsibility. They didn't really get up the nerve to dump Trilling until many years later when, owing to the resurgence of radicalism in the late Sixties, it no longer cost them anything.

It was the radical movement of the Sixties that brought the New York intellectuals back into the political limelight as avowed partisans of the Left. It didn't happen all at once,

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and there were many poisonous feuds to be negotiated along the way. Rahv, for example, abominated both Norman Mailer and Susan Sontag, who had emerged as the intellectual darlings of the radical movement, and his relations with Irving Howe were none too cordial, either. He had also split with *Partisan Review*, and started a magazine of his own called *Modern Occasions*. (One of his first priorities was to commission a blistering attack on Trilling.) But under the diplomatic auspices of Robert Silvers at *The New York Review of Books*, which had now supplanted *Partisan Review* as the principal intellectual organ of the highbrow Left, all was smoothly accomplished. Rahv re-emerged as—in Frederick Crews's wonderful phrase—a "born-again Leninist," and Dwight Macdonald, too, after years of political sleepwalking through the pages of *The New Yorker*, rediscovered the pleasures of radical militancy.

Right on cue, Mary McCarthy followed suit. If not exactly a "born-again Leninist" herself—years earlier she had confessed that "it was too late for me to become any kind of Marxist. Marxism, I saw . . . was something you had to take up young, like ballet dancing"—she nonetheless knew how to mimic the gestures and ideas that went with the position, and harness them to the rhetoric of social snobbery, which was her principal instrument as a political writer. In this respect, the Vietnam War should have been an ideal subject for her gimlet eye, allowing her to exercise the gift for caricature that she had used on her intellectual friends in *The Oasis*, on her Vassar classmates in *The Group*, and even on the art and culture of Venice in *Venice Observed*, on the hapless American military personnel in Saigon and Hanoi. But it turned out not to be such an ideal subject, after all. It couldn't be turned into a social comedy of manners—the material was too stark—and the art of caricature doesn't, in any case, live on easy terms with the kind of bathos she brought to her account of the "virtuous tyranny" she professed to adore in North Vietnam. The bad faith of the whole enterprise had finally capsized her style, which was the only thing she had brought to it in the first place.

In the end, Mary McCarthy's politics were like her sex life—promiscuous and unprincipled, more a question of opportunity than of commitment or belief. Because the author of *Writing Dangerously* is writing herself from inside the ethos of the radical movement that must be elucidated and judged if her subject's relation to it is to be understood, she cannot really deal with the central questions of McCarthy's life and work or with those of the intellectual generation to which McCarthy belonged—the so-called "last one to sustain an imaginative and critical involvement with the world around it." Ms. Brightman is in many respects a good writer, a diligent researcher and readable prose stylist who knows how to shape a narrative. But she has been disarmed by her experience and her pieties from asking the deepest questions about her material. (This was the problem with Eleanor Langer's *Josephine Herbst*, too.) About neither McCarthy nor her generation does she ever discover "how and why its writers pulled back from their early promise." The subject is simply lost in a blizzard of anecdote and annotation.

Because she cannot see her subject from the outside, moreover, Ms. Brightman's book also fails on other counts. For one thing, she misses the comedy of Mary McCarthy's career. It was only in writing about herself that McCarthy ever struck a really authentic note, and it is for this reason that the only books likely to survive are *The Company She Keeps* and *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood*. (By the time she came to write *How I Grew* and the unfinished *Intellectual Memoirs*, it was too late. She had lost touch with her material, and was inclined to prevaricate.) I don't regard *The Company She Keeps* as good fiction, but it is excellent social reportage and written on a scale appropriate to the very small compass of the author's talent. When she tried to do something larger in the same vein—*The Group*—it was a literary failure modeled on the clichés of the best-

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seller list of the day. Which is why the only thing ever recalled from that book—unless you are a Vassar alumna—is the account of Dottie and her pessary, which is very much in the vein of *The Company She Keeps*.

As for the later novels, I doubt if they will ever be reread by anyone who isn't paid to do so. *Birds of America* is particularly awful, and underscores what I mean by the comedy of McCarthy's career. When it came to her account of American society and its interest in food, which looms very large in that book, she simply didn't know what she was talking about. The whole country was in the grip of a culinary revolution while *Birds of America* was being written, and Mary McCarthy simply didn't know anything about it. She thought a pot of basil in the kitchen window was some sort of challenge to convention when the magazines and newspapers were already crowded with tips on what to do with it. It was the same, really, when she turned to the subjects of Venice and Florence—subjects far beyond her depth. She was never again the writer she had been in her early contributions to *Partisan Review*. Without intending to, of course, she too had "pulled back" from that "early promise," but Ms. Brightman has left it to the reader to figure out why and how.

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Heroic failures: the "Malcolm X" phenomenon

by James Bowman

It should come as no news that contemporary art lacks an idiom appropriate to heroism. We know our heroes too well, we are too intimate with their interior lives ever to allow them to re-assume the epic pedestal. And even the hero of romance—a man like us only more so—has long been a problematical figure. The anti-hero is still the man—although the woman is now allowed to step into the shoes vacated by the romantic hero. She has so much catching up to do since the days when she was only a heroine.

Perhaps no one would miss the old-fashioned male hero if it weren't for the needs of minorities not yet blasé with heroism—the sort of minorities for whom we prescribe, condescendingly, "role models." Back in the days when we English speakers were a small and threatened community on the outskirts of Europe, constantly in danger of being overrun by idol-worshiping Viking pirates, we had role models. Beowulf and Byrhtnoth and even Jesus Christ and the other heroes of the Christian religion towered above us and acted as our hedge against melancholy contingency. We also had a home for these heroes in an epic tradition that remained vigorously alive.

It is not the least of the dilemmas confronting black Americans that, while they continue to see themselves as a separate and to some extent a threatened community in need of heroes, they share with the larger cultural entity of which they are a part artistic forms which are uncongenial to the heroic. Malcolm X, as it now appears, is a hero without a heroic language in which to express himself. Or, rather, he is a hero whose heroism must create its own heroic language as it goes along.

That this is not a very satisfactory state of affairs was evident when Anthony Davis's opera *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* was first produced in the mid-Eighties. A recorded version of the opera, no doubt resuscitated by interest in Spike Lee's film version of Malcolm's life, has recently been issued on CD by Gramavision. Davis, in spite of occasional gestures (echoes of jazz and rap) in the direction of indigenous black culture, writes in the standard international idiom of contemporary "serious" music. This is a post-serialist, atonal style that sounds like nothing else on earth—except every other post-serialist, atonal composition that is lucky enough to get an NEA grant for production before sinking forever into the quicksands of oblivion.

Does it shock you to learn that this is not the language of heroism? It is not even the language of a human-scale Malcolm X. When Davis's music briefly emerges from the chaos of atonality in order to allude to Malcolm's cultural milieu it sounds more like the Euro-jazz of Kurt Weill or the cool jazz of the 1950s—cerebral styles much more in keeping with that of the international idiom—than it does like the 1940s big-band and swing music that Malcolm would have recognized. Thulani Davis's libretto is writ-

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ten in as homogenized and colorless a style as that of the New English Bible, and even a half-hearted rap number by a character named Street (well, what else would you call him?) includes lines like: "I mean your sartorial condition is curious."

I don't wish to be too hard on the Davises, who are probably much cleverer than I am—not to mention being members of an oppressed minority. I only mean to point out what seemingly insuperable barriers confront anyone who would re-invent heroism in the cultural forms at present available for its expression. This is a necessary caveat even in the case of Spike Lee, who is working in a cinematic tradition which has been home to heroic, even epic figures within living memory. The thought is a sobering one, but his *Malcolm X*, although it too falls short of giving us a convincing hero, may come as close as it is possible to get to one.

Most impressively, Lee *does* give us the feel of the streets as the Davises do not. His dance hall number, in which black couples jitterbug athletically to the music of Lionel Hampton, moves in every sense of the word—and arrives too soon at its ending. Lee has sure instincts for what is interesting, even compelling, to moviegoers, both black and white, and he is well-served by an outstanding cast—especially Denzel Washington as Malcolm; Angela Bassett as his wife, Betty; Lonette McKee as his mother; Delroy Lindo as his mentor in the numbers racket, West Indian Archie; and Al Freeman, Jr., as Elijah Muhammad.

It is only when he attempts the ascent to the heroic that Spike stumbles. His attempt to play Cecil B. DeMille to Malcolm's Moses, though it is not so wooden and unnatural as the DeMille epics, is in its own way every bit as hokey and two-dimensional. In *Do the Right Thing* and, to a lesser extent, in others of his earlier films, Lee showed an occasional ability to deal with complexities of character, to portray white people who were if not admirable at least somewhat sympathetic and to laugh at over-earnest black people. In *Malcolm X* not only the white characters but even most of the black ones are there only as properties on the set of the grand drama of Malcolm X.

To some extent that is what epic does: it flattens the background so as to make the epic hero stand out the more. But if you do that you have to be consistent. As it is, Lee's success in creating a realistic portrait of life in the black demi-monde of Harlem in the 1940s in the first half of the film vitiates his attempt to raise his hero to heroic heights in the second half. It is hard to blame him for this. Perhaps the only film epic that has not in some degree fallen victim to the tension between the realistic bias of the medium and the demands of the heroic is Abel Gance's *Napoleon*—and that had the advantage of being a silent film. More recent examples of the genre, such as *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Gandhi*, could rely on the exoticism of the material to create a sense of distance and awe not available to Lee. Even Cecil B. DeMille had the remoteness of the age of miracles as an aid to the suspension of disbelief.

But Lee aggravates his own epic dilemma by creating, or falling victim to, another sort of tension between rhetoric and reality that has become more and more pronounced both in Hollywood and in black culture in recent years. Perhaps it was unavoidable that, at the point where black fantasy-politics intersected with Hollywood image-politics there would have to be a very large film as conceptually flawed as Lee's is, but that doesn't make it any less sad a spectacle.

In Lee's defense, it should be said that this disconnection between rhetoric and reality is to some extent true to the spirit of Malcolm himself. Over the credits, we hear wildly hyperbolical rhetoric couched in the language of reason, of classical proportion and moderation: "I charge the White Man with being the greatest murderer on this earth; I charge the White Man with being the greatest kidnapper/robber/enslaver/swine-eater on this earth. I'm not an American; you're not an American. You're one of twenty-two million victims of America. We've never seen democracy; we only see hypocrisy."

The classically austere parallelism and an-

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tithesis, taken from Malcolm's own speeches, is meant to contrast oddly with the preposterousness of the content, and Spike Lee heightens the contrast with even more inflammatory imagery: a large American flag burning—until all that is left of it is miscellaneous stars and stripes in the shape of an X—intercut with scenes from the videotape of Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King. Those who are not infuriated by the burning flag will be infuriated by the beating of Rodney King (and, I regret to say, *vice* for the most part *versa*).

But when the film itself starts with a racy, comic, almost Amos 'n' Andyish portrait of life in the black ghetto of Roxbury, Boston, in 1941, we begin to suspect that the violent imagery is just—well—imagery. This is an impression that the rest of the film does nothing to disabuse us of, even though Lee provides four or five flashbacks from his hero's childhood, all having to do with racial violence against him or his family, whenever the Amos 'n' Andy stuff threatens to make us too comfortable.

Although the flashbacks come from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, on which the film was based, there is evidence to suggest that at least the two most striking among them, his mother's confrontation with a gang of KKK thugs when she was pregnant with him (which begins the book) and his father's death at the hands of white racists, never happened. Even if they did happen, however, Lee would have been well-advised to cut them out. They are too pat and clichéd and they contribute to the impression, not altogether unjustified, that Lee if not Malcolm picks his rhetoric up from wholesale suppliers.

But that sort of rhetorical overkill is what the film is finally about. If you have forgotten it by the end, just watch the remarkable conclusion with its black marchers in Soweto, old television footage of Malcolm, black schoolchildren claiming to *be* Malcolm, Nelson Mandela saying Malcolm's words, and so on. Ossie Davis strikes the keynote when he says that Malcolm "stopped being a Negro years ago. 'Negro' was too puny for him; he had become bigger than that: he had become an Afro-American."

These are obviously the words of a man for whom rhetoric simply *is* reality, so it is unsurprising that Davis makes the case in the afterword to the Ballentine paperback edition of the *Autobiography* that it is possible, nay easy to join the legion of Malcolm's followers without subscribing to anything he taught. This seems odd, apparently, to no one. Nor does Spike Lee's almost complete omission of the ratiocination by which the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad came to seem compelling to the original Malcolm. All that is left of it is one or two brief sentences spoken by the composite figure, the convict Baines (Albert Hall), who first converts Malcolm to the doctrines of the Hon. Elijah. "We were the original men," he says, "but they taught us that we lived in caves, swung from trees. It's not true. We were a race of kings. We are a nation, the tribe of Shabazz, lost in the wilderness of North America."

The idea of the "race of kings" is a perfect example of the sort of rhetorical flourish so far disconnected from reality that the imagination boggles at it. Um, would the women and children be kings too then? What would they be king of? What would *anybody* be king of? If every house was a palace, who would mow the grass? But preposterous as such stuff is, Lee is probably right to think it the least preposterous of the doctrines of Elijah Muhammad to which the *Autobiography* gives such loving attention. At least we can be glad not to have to listen to all the guff about the lost sheep of Islam and the paltry thirty-three degrees of freemasonry and the evil scientist, Mr. Yacub, who is supposed mischievously to have created a race of blue-eyed white devils on the Island of Patmos sixty-six hundred years ago.

Nor is there any mention by Spike Lee of the L. Ron Hubbard of the Muslims, one W. D. Fard, who is supposed to have taught all this rubbish and much, much more to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Likewise missing are the many crackpot ideas Malcolm, like so many earnest autodidacts, came

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up with on his own, including a contribution to the Shakespearean authorship controversy. His candidate was James I. No doubt he would have produced a theory of the Kennedy assassination too, had he been spared.

Such things may not have been an embarrassment to Mr. Lee, but they would have been to his film. Fortunately for its box-office potential, he recognizes implicitly the superiority of the first, mostly unpretentious half of the *Autobiography* to the boring second half wherein Malcolm goes all holy on us. This might have been dramatically tolerable if he had been a Saint Augustine; it is not where he is proclaiming his intellectual immaturity on almost every page. Yet Lee's lack of interest in Malcolm's ideas raises some interesting questions. Would it have mattered to him, for example, if Malcolm had taken an interest in the Bilderburgers or the Trilateral Commission or the international Communist conspiracy instead of the racial theories of Elijah Muhammad? Might he have been all that he is to his latter day admirers if he had discovered the Mormons rather than the Muslims?

For it is not some Islamic imam or ayatollah from Iran (the country that changed its name from Persia so as to emphasize its Aryan racial identity) who is brought in at the end of the film to do a celebrity guest spot but Nelson Mandela, a Methodist and lifelong ally of Communists. And indeed, the cult of Mandela and the cult of Malcolm are similar precisely in this: that the vast majority of their admirers have little or no interest in what they stand for apart from their assertion of black power and dignity. As the T-shirts that list significant "M"s—Marcus, Martin, Malcolm, Mandela, and Me—go on to say: "It's a black thing; you wouldn't understand it."

Quite. Some similar sentiment is what led Spike Lee to announce that he would only give interviews to black journalists, who are presumably less likely to care that his hero was a crank who believed the sorts of things that cranks and charlatans believe. Certainly, Lee has made his movie for those who don't care what he believed. Why does he not call himself Spike X? Why do not the crowds who flock to see the movie or the even bigger crowds who wear the "X" emblazoned on their baseball caps convert to Islam? How can a man, a preacher and teacher, be venerated as a hero when few or none of those who venerate him believe in the central teaching of his career? It is very curious.

Lee himself for the briefest of moments in the film seems to suggest that Malcolm was deluded. He has him meet up again with Baines, now one of Elijah Muhammad's stooges in the attack on himself, and quote back to him his own words: "I'm telling you God's words, not no hustle." Of course even he can now see that it was a hustle all along, but, like many another true believer, he merely concludes that he has yet to receive the pure version of the faith. We are left to wonder why his subsequent conversion to a more authentic version of Islam should not be a hustle too, especially if those who hold him up for our admiration believe in it no more than they do in the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

It is not as if there are no black heroes with more accomplishments to their name than a decade or so of faithful service to a discredited leader. Martin Luther King almost single-handedly and more than any president since Lincoln changed forever the face of America. But Malcolm has one thing that Martin has not: he has the splendid, the defiant, the lethal gesture. That's him in the last and most famous picture in Lee's iconography, holding the automatic rifle and exclaiming: "By any means necessary!" This is an adverbial expression detached from its context so as to emphasize that it is anything, everything, and therefore nothing in particular that is to be done "by any means necessary."

The vagueness about ends contrasts oddly with the insistence about means until you remember how much of black culture is still built around the fantasies of the powerless. To those who are used to helplessness, the end *is* the means. Unfortunately, continual

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indulgence in fantasies of power only retards progress toward the acquisition of real power. Corporate Hollywood's complicity with black fantasists like Spike Lee—or Ice-T, Sister Souljah, and other rappers—amounts to the dominant culture's buying off the natives with glass beads and trinkets.

There is one especially significant moment in *Malcolm X* in which Denzel Washington is shown selling sandwiches and snacks on a train between Boston and New York. A white sailor addresses him as "boy" and speaks with the sort of aggressive racialist intention to humiliate which must now be known to many middle-class blacks only from the movies. For a moment we are allowed to suppose that Malcolm sticks a lemon meringue pie in the sailor's face—until Lee cuts back to the real world and his swallowing of the insult. Another day, another fantasy. It is pathetic, but not the stuff of heroism.

Perhaps the real problem with the film's epic ambitions is that Spike Lee will not let Malcolm be Moses but instead makes him into the leader of the Golden Calf party. For the Golden Calf is fantasy, and Hollywood, which worships the same god, is a willing accomplice in keeping black people, like every other color of people, in thrall to this new form of servitude. The historical Malcolm, for all his rhetorical overload, may be ill-served by such a portrait, but Spike Lee can no more imagine him disdainful of the Golden Calf than he can imagine himself so. Thou shalt know the truth and the truth shall seem way less hip than fantasy. Check it out.

Throughout the film the motif of fake gun-play recurs. At one point Malcolm and his pal, Shorty (played by Lee himself), run through a park in their zoot suits pretending to be film gangsters shooting each other. "I want to be Bogart," says Shorty.

"You're too short to be Bogart," replies Malcolm.

"Not too short to be Cagney."

Bang, bang, he's dead. There is even a shot of Malcolm shot—shot by Shorty's imaginary bullets and hitting the dirt with a fake dead expression that foreshadows the scene of his eventual murder in the Audubon Ballroom in 1965. Later, as he and his characterless white girlfriend, Sophia (Kate Vernon), and West Indian Archie are snorting cocaine in a hotel room they play with Malcolm's gun to hoots of laughter. Malcolm pretends not to know that he is pointing it at himself when he intends to point it at West Indian Archie. Later he pretends to play Russian roulette with a rival for the leadership of their gang of burglars.

In this case it is interesting that Lee makes a point of showing that Malcolm palmed the bullet, though in the *Autobiography* there is no mention of his having done so. The film makes as much a point of honor of his skill as an illusionist and hustler as the book does of his reckless courage in playing the game for real. Even his escape from execution by West Indian Archie, which is made more dramatic in the film than it is in the book, is made to seem retrospectively like a charade as, years later, West Indian Archie, by now poor and ill and unable to walk, tells Malcolm: "I wasn't going to shoot you, man. It was just my rep. All I had was my rep."

The pretense, that is, had been necessary for the sake of his reputation or "rep"—a recurrent idea in both book and movie. Especially in the Harlem underworld it is made clear that "a man live by his rep" and "a man's rep travels," and, when Malcolm unintentionally calls Archie's reputation for never forgetting a number into question, "his rep is on the line." Malcolm's is too, of course, and the conflict of honor can only be resolved as such things have always been resolved: by fighting. The *Autobiography* makes this clear, but the film's view of reputation is much more that of the Hollywood press-agent than that of the duellist: it is whatever you can con people into believing about you with a flashy front and a swift patter.

Paradoxically, this makes Spike Lee the perfect director to bring the Malcolm X legend back to life for the Nineties, the decade in which revolution consists in putting automatic weapons onto the T-shirts instead of into the hands of the revolution-

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aries—and in which those who have the weapons themselves are petty criminals rather than revolutionaries. Where the original Malcolm had to escape from the mere self-indulgence of petty crime in order to be a revolutionary, now it seems that petty crime is as near as the would-be Lenins of the ghetto can get to revolution—which is why they want us to call the Los Angeles riots of last spring a "rebellion."

The sad ironies of this film are really those of the life of Malcolm X too, which is as good a test as any of authenticity. We wonder especially at the gullibility of this street-smart kid whose book-learning in prison taught him just enough so that he could swallow the patent idiocies of Elijah Muhammad's cosmology. So too he learned, first, that Christianity is a slave's religion (Nietzsche, of course, thought the same thing) and then that "the key" to the alternative, the black man's religion of Islam, "is submission." He submits as abjectly as any Christian.

And as Malcolm knelt during his pilgrimage to the Islamic holy places in 1964 to pray in Arabic, I wonder if it occurred to him to reflect on the fact that the Arabs were the last and most enthusiastic slave traders in the modern world; that their traffic in African flesh was only stopped by the blue-eyed devils of the British Empire. I wonder if it occurred to Denzel Washington twenty-eight years later. I wonder if it occurred to Spike Lee.

Sometimes, it is true, Lee is aware of the more obvious discontinuities between rhetoric and reality. He could hardly have made a film worth watching at all if he weren't. In one memorable scene, the voice-over of Malcolm's speech proclaiming that "the White Man should get down on his knees and beg for mercy" and "we have been down on our knees too long; I think it is time to stand up" accompanies a shot of Malcolm's former girlfriend, Laura, now a prostitute, kneeling to give a white man a blow job on a Harlem street.

Again, near the end, the Audubon Ball Room, where Malcolm will be assassinated, is shown as the scene of a dance which complements the joyous jitterbugging at Roseland in the beginning: only now a collection of glum teenagers are doing a very mechanical-looking jerk to a DJ's recording of "Shotgun" by Junior Walker and the All Stars. Then, when Malcolm walks from his car to the ballroom with a preoccupied air, an old black woman on her way to church stops him and tells him to keep on doing what he is doing—and to cheer up: "Jesus will protect you," she says.

There is about such scenes the quality of self-mockery which redounds very much to Spike Lee's credit. But this makes it all the more curious that he seems unwilling to risk any but the lightest shafts of mockery directed at the man who was almost certainly Malcolm's assassin, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. This may be because the opposition of his surviving organization, the Nation of Islam, now headed by Louis Farrakhan, would be harmful if not fatal to the film at the box office, but it also reinforces the sense of disjunction between words and deeds—in this case between Malcolm's rhetoric of self-defense and any serious interest in bringing to justice his killers.

It is one of the thousand self-contradictions in this deeply self-contradictory film. Lee makes a half-hearted move to suggest the possibility of FBI/CIA complicity in the assassination, but that's just going through the motions. In the end he allows us to read Malcolm's failure in counterpoint against the triumphal procession of the conclusion, and Lee is never more true to the cinematic language of the common culture than when, however briefly, he recognizes that failure. But he is also never further from his own dream of black heroism for which, if he could, he would betray the common culture. For better or for worse he cannot do it, and the anti-heroic language he is forced to work in betrays him instead. Spike Lee's failure is more interesting than Malcolm's, but in both it is the culture which destroys the hero rather than the other way about.

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What Henry James knew

by Cynthia Ozick

1. The horrible hours

As modernism sinks in, or fades out—as it recedes into a kind of latter-day archaism, Cubism turned antiquated, the old literary avant-garde looking convincingly moth-eaten—certain writers become easier to live with. It is not only that they seem more accessible, less impenetrable, simpler to engage with, after decades of familiarity: the quality of mystery has (mysteriously) been drained out of them. Joyce, Proust, Woolf, surely Pound and Eliot—from all of these, and from others as well, the veil draws back. One might almost say, as the twentieth century shuts down, that they are objectively less "modern" than they once were. Their techniques have been absorbed for generations. Their idiosyncrasies may not pall, but neither do they startle. Their pleasures and their stings, while far from humdrum, nevertheless open out into psychological references that are largely recognizable. What used to be revelation (Proust's madeleine, the world that ends not with a bang but a whimper) is reduced to reflex. One reads these masters now with satisfaction—they have been ingested—but without the fury of early avarice.

Yet one of the great avatars of modernism remains immune to this curious attrition: in the ripened Henry James, and in him almost alone, the sensation of mysteriousness does not attenuate; it thickens. As the years accumulate, James becomes, more and more compellingly, our contemporary, our urgency.

The author of "Daisy Miller" (1878), and of *Washington Square* (1880), and even of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), was a nineteenth-century writer of felicitous nuance and breadth. The earlier stories and novels are meant to be rooms with a view, thrown open to the light. If mysteries are gathered there, they are gathered to be dispelled. The entanglements of human nature, buffeted by accident, contingency, mistaken judgment, the jarrings of the social web, the devisings of the sly or the cruel, are in any event finally transparent, rational. Isabel Archer's long meditation, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, on her marriage to Gilbert Osmond leads her to the unraveling—the clarification—of her predicament. "They were strangely married," she perceives, "and it was a horrible life"—directly seen, understood, stated, in the manner of the fiction of realism. Like Catherine Sloper, the heroine of *Washington Square*, Isabel has known too little and now knows more. For the James of this mainly realist period, it is almost never a case of knowing too much.

After 1895, the veil thickens. Probably the most celebrated example of a darkening texture is the interpretive history of "The Turn of the Screw" (1898); what was once read wholly in the light of its surfaces can no longer sustain the innocence, or the obtuseness, of its original environment. The tale's first readers, and James himself, regarded this

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narrative of a frightened governess and her unusual young charges as primarily a ghost story, suitably shadowed in eerie riddle. In his Notebook sketch of 1895, James speaks of "apparitions," of "evil presences," of hauntings and their "strangely gruesome effect." In the Preface to "The Turn of the Screw" for the 1906 New York Edition of his work, he appears light-handedly to toss out the most conventional of these rumblings. "I cast my lot with pure romance," he insists, and calls "this so full-blown flower of high fancy" a "fairy-tale pure and simple." But also, and contradictorily, he assigns his apparitions "the dire duty of causing the situation to reek with the air of Evil," the specifications of which James admits he has left it to the reader to supply. "Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself," he asserts.

Since then, under the tutelage of Freud, later readers *have* thought it for themselves, and have named, on James's behalf, a type of horror he could not or would not have brought to his lips. What was implicit in James became overt in Freud. With time, and with renewed critical speculation, James's ghosts in "The Turn of the Screw" have swollen into the even more hideous menace of eros corrupted, including the forbidden, or hidden, sexuality of children. Whether James might have conceived explicitly of these images and hints of molestation is beside the point. There is, he contends in the Preface, "from beginning to end of the matter not an inch of expatiation," and evil's particulars are, on purpose, "positively all blanks," the better to delegate the imagination of terror to anyone but the author himself. Still, is it likely that the privacy of James's own imagination can be said to hold positively all blanks? Imagination works through exactitudes of detail, not through the abdication of its own authority. Whatever it was James thought, he thought *some*thing. Or, rather, he felt something: that gauzy wing that brushes the very pit of the mind even as the mind declares nothing is there. James is one of that handful of literary proto-inventors—ingenious intuiters—of the unconscious; it is the chief reason we count him among the imperial moderns.

The pivotal truth about the later Henry James is not that he chooses to tell too little—that now and then he deliberately fires blanks—but that he knows too much, and much more than we, or he, can possibly take in. It is as if the inklings, inferences, and mystifications he releases in his maturest fictions (little by little, like those medicinal pellets that themselves contain tinier pellets) await an undiscovered science to meet and articulate them. The Freud we already have may be insufficient to the James who, after 1895, became the recondite conjurer whom the author of "Daisy Miller" might not have recognized as himself.

In the fiction of realism—in the Jamesian tale before the 1895 crux—knowledge is the measure of what can be rationally ascertained, and it is almost never a case of knowing too much—i.e., of a knowledge beyond the reach not only of a narrative's dramatis personae but also of the author himself. The masterworks of modernism, however, nearly always point to something far more subterranean than simple ascertainment. *The Castle*, for example, appears to know more than Kafka himself knows—more about its own matter and mood, more about its remonstrances and motives, more about the thread of Kafka's mind. In the same way, "The Turn of the Screw" and other Jamesian works of this period and afterward—*The Awkward Age* above all, as we shall see—vibrate with cognitions that are ultimately not submissive to their creator. It is as if from this time forward, James will write nothing but ghost stories—with the ghosts, those shadows of the unconscious, at the controls. Joyce in particular sought to delineate whatever demons beat below, to bring them into the light of day—to explain them by playing them out, to incarnate them in recognizable forms, or (as in *Finnegans Wake*) to re-incubate them in the cauldron of language. This was what the modernists did, and it is because they succeeded so well in teaching us about the presence of the unconscious that we find them more and more

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accessible today. But the later James—like Kafka, a writer seemingly as different from James as it is possible to be—is overridden by a strangeness that is beyond his capacity to domesticate or explicate. James, like Kafka, enters mazes and penetrates into the vortex of spirals; and, again like Kafka, the ghost in the vortex sometimes wears his own face.

The 1895 crux, as I have called it, was James's descent into failure and public humiliation. The story of that humiliation—a type of exposure that damaged James perhaps lastingly, and certainly darkened his perspectives—is brilliantly told in Leon Edel's consummate biography: a biography so psychologically discriminating that it has drawn generations of its readers into a powerful but curious sympathy with James. Curious, because an admirable genius is not nearly the same as a sympathetic one, an instruction James himself gives us in, to choose only two, Hugh Vereker and Henry St. George, the literary luminaries of a pair of tales ("The Figure in the Carpet," "The Lesson of the Master") bent on revealing the arrogance of art. Yet to approach James through Edel is, if not practically to fall in love with James, to feel the exhilarations of genius virtually without flaw. James, for Edel, is sympathetic and more; he is unfailingly and heroically civilized, selfless for art, gifted with an acuity of insight bordering on omniscience. He is—in James's own celebrated words—one of those upon whom nothing is lost. Edel's is a portrait that breaks through the frame of immaculate scholarship into generous devotion, a devotion that in the end turns on a poignant theory of James's fragility of temperament—and never so much as on the night of January 5, 1895, when James's play *Guy Domville*, opening that evening, was jeered at and its author hissed.

Too nervous to sit through the rise of the curtain, James had gone down the street to attend Oscar Wilde's new work, *An Ideal Husband*. When it was over, scorning Wilde as puerile even as he made his way out through a wash of delighted applause, he returned to *Guy Domville* just as the closing lines were being spoken. Though the clapping that followed was perilously mixed with catcalls, the theater manager, misjudging, brought James out on the stage. "All the forces of civilization in the house," James described it afterward, "waged a battle of the most gallant, prolonged and sustained applause with the hoots and jeers and catcalls of the roughs, whose roars (like those of a cage of beasts at some infernal zoo) were only exacerbated by the conflict." George Bernard Shaw, who was in the audience as a reviewer, wrote of the "handful of rowdies" and "dunces" who sent out "a derisive howl from the gallery." James stumbled off the stage and walked home alone, brooding on "the most horrible hours of my life." The catastrophe of public rejection, James's biographer concludes, "struck at the very heart of his self-esteem, his pride and sovereignty as an artist."

It *had* been a sovereignty. In fact it had been an impregnability. He would not have been so damaged had he not had so far to fall. Literary embarrassment, to be sure, was familiar enough to James; it depressed him, as he grew older, that his novels were no longer widely read, and that his sales were often distressingly puny. But the assault on *amour-propre* that rocked James in the wake of his theater debacle was something else. It was a vulnerability as unprecedented as it was real—feelings of jeopardy, the first faint cracks of existential dread, the self's enfeeblement. He was unused to any of that; he had never been fragile, he had never been without the confidence of the self-assured artist, he had never been mistrustful. What he had been all along was magisterial. Admirers of Leon Edel's James may be misled by Edel's tenderness into imagining that some psychological frailty in James himself is what solicits that tenderness—but sovereign writers are not commonly both artistically vulnerable *and* sovereign.

And James's record of sovereignty—of tough impregnability—was long. He was fifty-two when the rowdies hissed him; he was twenty-one when he began publishing his Olympian reviews. To read these early essays is to dispel any notion of endemic hesitancy or perplexity. In 1866, at twenty-

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three, reviewing a translation of Epictetus, he speculates on the character of this philosopher of Stoicism with oracular force: "He must have been a wholesome spectacle in that diseased age, this free-thinking, plain-speaking old man, a slave and a cripple, sturdily scornful of idleness, luxury, timidity, false philosophy, and all power and pride of place, and sternly reverent of purity, temperance, and piety—one of the few upright figures in the general decline." This has the tone not simply of a prodigy of letters, but of large command, of one who knows the completeness of his powers. If anything can be said to be implicit in such a voice, it is the certainty of success; success on its own terms—those terms being the highest imaginable exchange between an elite artist and his elite readership. And the earlier these strenuous yet ultimately serene expectations can be established, the stronger the shield against vulnerability; mastery in youth arms one for life.

Or nearly so. On the night of January 5, 1895, when the virtuoso's offering was received like a fizzled vaudeville turn, the progress of unquestioned fame came to a halt. What was delicacy, what was wit, what was ardor, what was scrupulous insight? What, in brief, was the struggle for art if its object could be so readily blown away and trodden on? James might wrestle with these terrors till dawn, like that other Jacob, but his antagonist was more likely a messenger from Beelzebub than an angel of the Lord. Failure was an ambush, and the shock of it led him into an inescapable darkness.

He emerged from it—if he ever emerged from it at all—a different kind of writer. Defensively, he began to see in doubles. There was drama, and there was theater. And by venturing into the theater, he had to live up to—or down to—the theater's standards and assumptions. "I may have been meant for the Drama—God knows!—but I certainly wasn't meant for the Theater," he complained. And another time: "Forget not that you write for the stupid—that is, that your maximum of refinement must meet the minimum of intelligence of the audience—the intelligence, in other words, of the biggest ass it may contain. It is a most unholy trade!" Yet in 1875, twenty years before the *Guy Domville* calamity, he exalted what had then seemed the holiest of trades, one that "makes a demand upon an artist's rarest gifts." "To work successfully beneath a few grave, rigid laws," he reflected, "is always a strong man's highest ideal of success." In 1881 he confided to his journal that "beginning to work for the stage" was "the most cherished of my projects."

The drama's attraction—its seductiveness—had its origin in childhood theater-going; the James children were introduced first to the New York stage and then to the playhouses of London and Paris, of which they becames habitués. But the idea of the *scene*—a passion for structure, trajectory, and revelation that possessed James all his life—broke on him from still another early source: the transforming ecstasy of a single word. On a summer night in 1854, in the young Henry's presence, a small cousin his own age (he was then eleven) was admonished by her father that it was time to go to bed, and ran crying to her mother for a reprieve. "Come now, my dear: don't make a scene—I *insist* on your not making a scene," the mother reproved, and at that moment James, rapturously taking in the sweep of the phrase, fell irrevocably in love with the "witchcraft," as he called it, of the scene's plenitude and allure. "The expression, so vivid, so portentous," he said in old age, "was one I had never heard—it had never been addressed to us at home. . . . Life at these intensities clearly became 'scenes'; but the great thing, the immense illumination, was that we could make them or not as we chose."

That, however, was the illumination of drama, not the actuality of theater managers, actors, audiences. The ideal of the stage—as a making, a kneading, a medium wholly subject to the artist's will—had become infected by its exterior mechanisms. "The dramatic form," he wrote in 1882, "seems to me the most beautiful thing possible; the misery of the thing is that the baseness of the English-speaking stage affords no setting for it." By

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1886 he was driven to confess that the "very dear dream . . . had faded away," and that he now thought "less highly of the drama, as a form, a vehicle, than I did—compared with the novel which can do and say so much more." In James's novel of the theater, *The Tragic Muse*, begun in 1888, a character bursts out, "What crudity compared to what the novelist does!" And in 1894, in a letter to his brother William, James speculated that "unless the victory and the spoils have not . . . become more proportionate than hitherto to the humiliations and vulgarities and disgusts, all the dishonor and chronic insult," he intended "to 'chuck' the whole intolerable experiment and return to more elevated and independent courses. I have come to *hate* the whole theatrical subject."

It was a gradual but steady repudiation, repeatedly contradicted by James's continuing and zigzag pursuit of managers and productions. In the end, the theater repudiated *him*; but the distinction he insisted on between theater, that low endeavor, and drama, that "highest ideal," went on to serve him in what would become one of his strangest fictions. After *Guy Domville*, he undertook to imagine a novel which would have all the attributes of a theatrical production. The reader would be supplied with dialogue, sets, grand and ingenious costuming, gestures of the head and hand; there would be entrances and exits; there would be drawing rooms and wit. The "few grave, rigid laws" of the drama would wash away all the expository freedoms and flexibilities of the traditional novel—above all the chance to explain the action, to comment and interpret, to speak in metaphor. Narrative, and the narrator's guiding hum, would give way to the bareness of talk unaccoutered and unconstrued, talk deprived of authorial amplification; talk as *clue*.

The work that was to carry the burden of this lucidly calculated experiment was conceived on March 4, 1895, two months after the failure of *Guy Domville*. On that day James entered into his Notebook "the idea of the little London girl who grows up to 'sit with' the free-talking modern young mother . . . and, though the conversation is supposed to be expurgated for her, inevitably hears, overhears, guesses, follows, takes in, becomes acquainted with, horrors." The Notebook recorded nothing about any intention to mimic the form of a play. But in his Preface to the New York Edition (1908) of *The Awkward Age*, James stressed that, from the start, the story and its situation had presented itself to him "on absolutely scenic lines, and that each of these scenes in itself . . . abides without a moment's deflexion by the principle of the stage-play." Speaking of the "technical amusement" and "bitter-sweetness" arising from this principle, he reflected on the rich novelistic discursiveness he had early determined to do without: "Exhibition may mean in a 'story' twenty different ways, fifty excursions, alternatives, excrescences, and the novel, as largely practiced in English, is the perfect paradise of the loose end." The play, by contrast, "consents to the logic of but one way, mathematically right, and with the loose end as gross an impertinence on its surface, and as grave a dishonour, as the dangle of a snippet of silk or wool on the right side of a tapestry." Moreover, he pointed out, the play is committed to "objectivity," to the "imposed absence of that 'going behind,'" to eschewing the "storyteller's great property-shop of aids to illusion."

In choosing to write a novel confined to dialogue and scene; in deciding to shape *The Awkward Age* according to self-limiting rules of suppression and omission; in giving up the brilliant variety of the English novel's widest and lushest potential, an art of abundance that he had long ago splendidly perfected—what was James up to? What system of psychological opposition had he fallen into? On the one hand, a play in the form of a novel, or a novel in the form of a play, was a response to "the most horrible hours of my life." What the stage would not let him do, he would do in any case—on his own venerable turf, with no possibility of catcalls. An act of triumph, or contempt, or revenge; perhaps a reward for having endured so much shame. And on the other hand, a kind of penance: he

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was stripping himself clean, reducing a luxuriant craft to a monkish surrender of its most capacious instruments.

But penance for what? *The Awkward Age* represents an enigma. Though it intends unquestionably to be a comedy—a social comedy, a comedy of manners (as "The Turn of the Screw" unquestionably sets out to be a ghost story)—some enormous grotesquerie, or some grotesque enormity, insinuates itself into this ultimately mysterious work. Having straitjacketed his tale with the "few grave, rigid laws" of the stage, James resolved not to "go behind" its scenes with all those dozens of canny analyses and asides that are possible for the novel; yet on the whole it is as if proscenium and backdrop, and all the accouterments between them, have melted away, and nothing is left but what is "behind"—a "behind" any ordinary novelistic explication would not be equal to and could not touch. Paradoxically, the decision *not* to "go behind" put James squarely backstage, in the dark of the wings, in ill-lit and untidy dressing rooms among discarded makeup jars and their sticky filth—in the very place where there can be no explanation of the world on stage, because the world on stage is an invention and an untruth. James descended, in short, into an interior chaos; or to say it otherwise, with the composition of *The Awkward Age* he became, finally and incontrovertibly, a modernist. Like the modernists, he swept past the outer skin (the theater and its stage, the chatter of counterfeit drawing rooms, the comings and goings of actors and audiences, the coherent conscious machinery of things) to the secret life behind—glimmers of buried truths, the undisclosed drama of hint and inference.

The façade of comedy and the horror behind. And the penalty for "going behind"—while rigging up, via those "few grave, rigid laws," every obstacle to it—was the impenetrable blackness, the blankness, the *nox perpetua*, that gathered there among the ropes and pulleys, where it is inevitable that one "hears, overhears, guesses, follows, takes in, becomes acquainted with, horrors." (The condition, one might note, of K. in *The Castle*.) And the horrors themselves? They cannot be named. It is their namelessness that defines them as horrors.

Yet James did give them a name—amorphous, suggestive, darkened by its imperial Roman origins, reminiscent of ancient clerical pageantry, more a riddle than a name: "the sacred terror." A translation, or more likely a transmutation, of *sacro terrore*; the awe one feels in the presence of sacred or exalted personages, Pope or emperor, before whom one may not speak; the dread one feels before the divine mysteries, or the head of Medusa. The face of a knowledge that is behind our knowledge—intimations that cannot be borne. In the preface to "The Turn of the Screw," James referred (handling it lightly so as not to be burned) to "the dear old sacred terror" as "the withheld glimpse" of "dreadful matter." The glimpse is withheld: to be permitted more than the glimpse would be to know too much. The sacred terror is, in fact, the sensation—not simply fright, but a kind of revulsion—that comes when glimpse perilously lengthens into gaze.

II. The sacred terror

In 1894, the year before the idea of *The Awkward Age* materialized in his Notebook, and not long before *Guy Domville* went into rehearsals, two electrifying personal events brought James close to the sacred terror, far closer than he wished to be. In both instances he stopped at glimpse and contrived to shut himself away from gaze. The first event was the suicide, in Italy, of Constance Fenimore Woolson. A relation of James Fenimore Cooper, Fenimore (as she was called) was an American novelist who settled successively in Florence, Venice, and Rome. Bent on homage, she had first approached James in 1880, in Florence, with a letter of introduction from America. James found her intelligent and moderately engaging, and offered his assistance as an acutely sophisticated guide to Florentine art. But what was a cautious friendship on his part became, on hers, a worshipful love. James could not reciprocate. She was middle-aged, unmarried,

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deaf in one ear—an admirable companion whom he was learning to be wary of. He worried that she might mistake occasional camaraderie for an encouragement of the affections. The news of her death in 1894, after nearly a decade and a half of correspondence (her letters were very long, his very short) bewildered and initially misled him. He had the impression she had died of "pneumonia supervening on influenza," and prepared to journey from London to her funeral in Rome. "Poor isolated and fundamentally tragic being!" he summed her up. "She was intrinsically one of the saddest and least happy natures I have ever met; and when I ask myself what I *feel* about her death the only answer that comes to me is from what I felt about the melancholy, the limitations and the touching loneliness of her life. I was greatly attached to her and valued exceedingly her friendship." All that, however, was glimpse, not gaze. The moment James learned it was suicide that had removed Fenimore—she had leaped from a second-story window—he retreated quickly and decided against attending her burial. Leon Edel speculates that James felt some responsibility for the hopelessness that had led to what James termed her "suicidal mania." Whether that is so or not, it is certainly true that James came to rest in a conventional, and distancing, judgment—"fundamentally tragic being!"—and averted his eyes from any connection he might have had with Fenimore's dread, or her destruction. He would not seek to know too much. He would evade the sacred terror. He would not "go behind": the preparation for going behind—the horrible hours—had not yet occurred.

Two years before Fenimore's death, James's sister Alice died in London. The cause was breast cancer, but she had been strangely invalided since girlhood, and was in the care of a young woman companion, Katharine Loring. Alice had followed James to London, or had at least followed his inclination to extract himself from America. Hers was an activist temperament (she interested herself in the hot politics of Irish Home Rule) that had chosen, for reasons neither her physicians nor her family could fathom, to go to bed for life. An 1889 photograph of her lodgings at Leamington—a health resort outside of London—survives; a capacious sick-room, high-ceilinged, with a single vast window, curtained and draperied; pictures dropped on long wires from the wainscoting; a chandelier sprouting fat globes; a tall carved mirror over a black fireplace; a round table with lamp, vase, flowers, books, magnifying glass. The effect is of Victorian swathing—layers of cloth over every flat and vertical surface: the mantel hung with cloth, the table, the back of a chair. Lamps, jugs, flowers, photos parade across the mantel. The Persian hearthrug smothers still another carpet, splotched with large flowers. Alice James herself seems swathed, almost swaddled, half-erect on a kind of sofa muffled in voluminously sprawling bedclothes, pillows propping her shoulder and neck. Next to her, nearer the window, holding a book, sits Miss Loring, her throat and bosom lost in a flurry of scarves. Both women are severely buttoned to the chin. It is a photograph that incites the lungs to gulp air; if it were possible to step into this scene, though the looking glass is polished and clear, one might feel choked by too many flower-patterns, the mistiness of light incarcerated, the stale smells of unrelieved enclosure.

William James, in his farewell letter to his sister, wrote that "if the tumor should turn out to be cancerous, . . . then goodbye to neurasthenia and neuralgia and headache, and weariness and palpitation and disgust all at one stroke." To this physician brother, Alice had all along suffered from "the inscrutable and mysterious character of the doom of nervous weakness which has chained you down for all these years." Alice's illness, in short, was—until the advent of cancer—what we nowadays call "psychological." The genius sister of two genius brothers, she was self-imprisoned, self-restricted. Engulfed by cushions and shawls and wrappings at Leamington, in 1889 she began a diary: "I think that if I get into the habit of writing a bit about what happens, or

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rather what doesn't happen, I may lose a little of the sense of loneliness and desolation which abides with me."

She had had a history of terrors and nightmares. At twenty she had her first nervous breakdown (if that is what it was), at thirty her second, whereupon she was launched into an infinite series of undiagnosable ailments and their dubious, sometimes bizarre, remedies. She talked of suicide, and kept lists of contemporary suicides. She struggled for intellectual autonomy in an age when young women submitted, through marriage or otherwise, to the limitations of the domestic. Invalidism was, obliquely, one manner of solution: it yielded up an escape from ordinary female roles and contexts. At rest on her sofa, surrounded by heaps of books on every table-top, Alice lived in her head. In her head she fought for Irish liberation; in her head she fought for her own. A famous sentence in her diary records a passionate revolution, in fantasy, of body and soul against a ruling class of one: "As I used to sit immovable reading in the library with waves of violent inclination suddenly invading my muscles, taking some one of their myriad forms such as throwing myself out of the window or knocking off the head of the benignant pater as he sat with his silver locks, writing at his table, it used to seem to me that the only difference between me and the insane was that I had not only all the horrors and suffering of insanity but the duties of doctor, nurse, and straitjacket upon me too."

In contrast to these dark recollections, Alice's diary offers a mellow view of Henry James, who often came to divert her and Miss Loring, bringing catty news and speculative gossip from his broader social world. "I have given him endless care and anxiety but notwithstanding this and the fantastic nature of my troubles I have never seen an impatient look upon his face or heard an unsympathetic or misunderstanding sound cross his lips. He comes at my slightest sign," she wrote, and spoke of a "pitch of brotherly devotion never before approached by the race." After Alice's death in 1892, Katharine Loring took away with her to Boston an urn containing Alice's ashes, and two thick notebooks; the latter were the pages of the diary. Two years later—in 1894, the year of Fenimore's suicide—Miss Loring arranged for the diary to be privately printed, and dispatched one copy to Henry, and another to William. Both brothers were impressed. Henry described his sister's literary claim —he recognized that the diary *was* a literary work—as "heroic in its individuality, its independence—its face-to-face with the universe for and by herself," and praised the "beauty and eloquence," the "rich irony and humor," of Alice's pen. William's own high pleasure—"a leaf in the family laurel crown" —was tempered by a graver evaluation: "personal power venting itself on no opportunity," he concluded.

But it was Henry who backed away from the diary—much as he had had second thoughts about going to Fenimore's funeral. To begin with, he insisted that the diary not be published in his lifetime; and then he burned his copy—motivated, he said, by Alice's habit of setting down his sometimes unseemly accounts of friends and acquaintances. (Years later he made a bonfire of all the thousands of letters in his possession, obliterating the revelations of decades.) Amusement had become, in his sister's hands, document. James found himself shaken by "so many names, personalities, hearsays (usually, on Alice's part, through *me*!)"; he informed William that Alice's exposures made him "intensely nervous and almost sick with terror about possible publicity, possible accidents, reverberation etc.," and that he "used to say everything to Alice (on system) that could *égayer* [entertain] her bedside and many things in confidence. I didn't dream she wrote them down. . . . It is a 'surprise' that is too much of a surprise." There was more for James to grapple with, though, than the mortification of stumbling on his own remarks. It might be disconcerting that Alice had mentioned a certain essayist's "self-satisfied smirk." Yet something else lay coiled at the bottom of his sister's diary, and James was unequipped to live with it.

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He met there, in fact—side by side with the bits of raillery and the vehement Irish nationalism—terrifying resonances and reminiscent apparitions. After the death of the James paterfamilias at home in Massachusetts, the diary disclosed, Alice, desolate in an empty house, was assaulted by the vibrations of a voice: "In those ghastly days, when I was by myself in the little house on Mt. Vernon Street, how I longed to flee . . . and escape from the 'Alone, Alone!' that echoed thro' the house, rustled down the stairs, whispered from the walls, and confronted me, like a material presence, as I sat waiting, counting the moments." James himself, five years after the undoing of *Guy Domville*, grieved over "*the essential loneliness of my life*" (the emphasis is his own). "This loneliness," he put it, "what is it still but the deepest thing about one? Deeper, about *me*, at any rate, than anything else; deeper than my 'genius,' deeper than my 'discipline,' deeper than my pride, deeper, above all, than the deep counterminings of art."

Alice James's "Alone!" and Henry James's "deepest thing" had their antecedents in a phantasmagorical visitation endured by their father fifty years before. It was a vision, or a phantom, or an omen, so paralyzing to the spirit, so shocking in its horror, that Henry James Senior was compelled to give it a name (seemingly a fusion of "devastation," "visitation," "vast") out of Swedenborgian metaphysics: *vastation*. One spring day after dinner, he testified, "feeling only the exhilaration incident to a good digestion," he was all at once flooded by panic: "To all appearance it was a perfectly insane and abject terror, without ostensible cause, and only to be accounted for, to my perplexed imagination, by some damnèd shape squatting invisible to me within the precincts of the room, and raying out from his fetid personality influences fatal to life. The thing had not lasted ten seconds before I felt myself a wreck; that is, reduced from a state of firm, vigorous, joyful manhood to one of almost helpless infancy." And another time he described himself as "inwardly shriveled to a cinder," altered to a "literal nest of hell within my own entrails."

The younger Henry James had turned away from Fenimore's suicide. In nearly the same moment he had turned away from his sister's diary. The suicide intimated influences fatal to life from a fetid personality. The diary was fundamentally a portrait of infantile helplessness, a shriveled soul, hell within the entrails. The elder James, with his damnèd shape; Fenimore, flinging herself to the pavement; Alice, listening to the ghostly susurrations of her abandonment—each had dared to look into the abyss of knowing-too-much; James would not look with them. It was not until he had himself succumbed to his own vastation—eye to eye with the sacred terror on the stage of the St. James Theater in 1895—that he was ready to exchange glimpse for gaze. The brawling pandemonium (it continued, in fact, for fifteen minutes) had not lasted ten seconds before he felt himself a wreck, reduced from a state of firm, vigorous, sovereign artistry to one of almost helpless infancy. Everything he had thought himself to be—a personage of majestic achievement—disintegrated in an instant. He could not go on as he had. Simply, he lost his nerve.

But he found, in the next work he put his hand to, not only a new way of imagining himself, but a new world of art. By paring away narrative rumination and exposition—by treating the novel as if it were as stark as a play-script—he uncovered (or invented) a host of labyrinthine depths and devices that have since been signally associated with literary modernism. For one thing, representation, while seeming to keep to its accustomed forms, took on a surreal quality, inscrutably off-center. For another, intent, or reason, gave way to the inchoate, the inexpressible. The narrative no longer sought to make a case for its characterizations; indirection, deduction, detection, inference, proliferated. An unaccountable presence, wholly unseen, was at last let in, even if kept in the tale's dark cellar: the damnèd shape, the sacred terror. The tale began to know more than the teller, the dream more than the

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dreamer; and Henry James began his approach to the Kafkan. In those "most horrible hours of my life" after his inward collapse on the stage of the St. James, the curtain was being raised for *The Awkward Age*.

III. *The Awkward Age*

The Awkward Age is, ostensibly, a comedy of manners, and resembles its populous class in that it concerns itself with the marriageability of a young woman. Nearly a hundred years after James wrote, no theme may appear so moribund, so obsolete, as the notion of "marrying off" a daughter. Contemporary daughters (and contemporary wives) enter the professions or have jobs, and do not sit on sofas, month after month, to be inspected by possibly suitable young men who are themselves to be inspected for their incomes. The difference between late-Victorian mores and our own lies in female opportunity and female initiative, with freedom of dress and education not far behind. Yet the similarities may be stronger than the differences. It is still true that the term of marital eligibility for young women is restricted to a clearly specified span of years; it is still true that a now-or-never mentality prevails, and that young women (and often their mothers) continue to be stung by the risks of time. The gloves, parasols, boas, corsets, feathered hats, and floor-sweeping hems have vanished; the anxiety remains. A century ago, getting one's daughter appropriately married was a central social preoccupation, and, though marriage is nowadays not a young woman's only prescribed course in life, it is as much a gnawing preoccupation as it ever was. In this respect, no one can call the conditions of *The Awkward Age* dated.

In respect of sexual activity, those conditions are equally "modern." If sexual activity, in habit and prospect, defines manners, then—as a comedy of manners—*The Awkward Age* is plainly not a period piece. To be sure, society no longer pretends, as the Victorians did, to an ideal of young virgins kept from all normal understanding until the postnuptial deflowering; but in *The Awkward Age*, which depicts a public standard of ineffable purity not our own, that standard is mocked with bawdy zest. (Henry James bawdy? Consider the scuffle during which little Aggie sets her bottom firmly down upon a salacious French novel.) *The Awkward Age*, as a matter of fact, teems with adultery and emblems of incest; what appears to be wholesome finally suggests the soiled and the despoiled.

Still, it is not sexual standards and their flouting that move this novel from its opening lightness toward the shadowed distortions that are its destination. Rather, it is the unpredictable allegiances of probity. Probity arrives in the shape of Mr. Longdon, who "would never again see fifty-five" but is rendered as an aged, even antediluvian, gentleman, complete with pince-nez, old-fashioned reticences, and touchy memories of his prime. In his prime, in a moral atmosphere he judges to be superior to that of the present, he (long ago) loved and lost Lady Julia. He has never married, and for years has lived away from London, in the country, in a house poignantly similar to James's own Lamb House in Rye. He is a meticulous watcher and silent critic, sensitive, upright, certainly elderly in his perception of himself; a man of the past. One might imagine at first that Mr. Longdon (he is always called "Mr.") is yet another incarnation of James's eager old gentlemen—the life-seeker Strether who, in *The Ambassadors*, opens himself to the seductions of Paris, or the thrill-thirsty John Marcher of "The Beast in the Jungle," who waits for some grand sensation or happening to befall him. Mr. Longdon, by contrast, is a backward-looker. Lady Julia was his Eden, and the world will never again be so bright or so right. "The more one thinks of it," he remarks, "the more one seems to see that society . . . can never have been anything but increasingly vulgar. The point is that in the twilight of time—and I belong, you see, to the twilight—it had made out much less how vulgar it *could* be."

He has come to London, then, as a kind of anthropologist (though his motives are never clarified), on the trail of Lady Julia's

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descendants, and is welcomed into the culture of the natives: the chief of the natives being Mrs. Brookenham, Lady Julia's daughter, who is at the hub of a fevered salon. All roads lead to Mrs. Brook's, and the travelers are encrusted with bizarre trappings. The Duchess, a callously opportunistic Englishwoman who is the widow of a minor Italian aristocrat, is rearing her Neapolitan ward, Agnesina ("little Aggie"), as a snow-white slate on which "the figures were yet to be written." The hugely rich Mr. Mitchett, known as Mitchy, rigged out in unmatched merry-andrew gear and tolerant to the point of nihilism, is the zany but good-hearted son of a shoemaker become shoe mogul. Vanderbank, or Van—a handsome, winning, self-protective, evasive young man of thirty-five, impecunious on a mediocre salary, whom Mr. Longdon befriends—is Mrs. Brook's (relatively) secret lover. In and out of Mrs. Brook's salon flow schemers, snobs, faithless wives and husbands, jesters, idlers, fantastic gossips; even a petty thief, who happens to be Mrs. Brook's own son, Harold. And at the tea table in the center of it all sits (now and then) her daughter, Lady Julia's granddaughter, Fernanda—Nanda—who smokes, runs around London "squeezing up and down no matter whose staircase," and chooses as an intimate a married woman with an absent husband.

Nanda is fully aware of the corrupted lives of her mother's circle. Her father is indifferent, negligent, a cipher; her brother sponges on everyone who enters the house, and on every house he enters; her parents live enormously beyond their means; all relationships are measured by what can be gotten out of them. "Edward and I," Mrs. Brook declares to the Duchess, "work it out between us to show off as tender parents and yet to get from you everything you'll give. I do the sentimental and he the practical." With her "lovely, silly eyes," Mrs. Brook at forty-one is youthfully attractive, but cuts two years off her daughter's age in order to snip two years from her own. There is no shame, no guilt, no conscience; the intrinsic has no value.

All these people (but for the blunt Duchess, who is plain Jane) have names that are cursory, like their lives; Mrs. Brook, Van, Mitchy, Aggie, Tishy, Carrie, even Nanda; it is as if only Mr. Longdon troubles to take a long breath. "I've been seeing, feeling, thinking," he admits. He understands himself to be "a man of imagination," an observer, with a "habit of not privately depreciating those to whom he was publicly civil." (A habit that James himself, on the evidence of the embarrassments of Alice's diary, did not always live up to.) Mrs. Brook's salon, by contrast, feeds on conspiracy, on sublimely clever talk, on plots and outrageous calculations, on malice and manipulation, on exploitation, on matchmaking both licit and illicit; everyone is weighed for cash worth. Mitchy rates high on the money scale, low on social background. Vanderbank, with his beauty and cultivated charm, is the reverse. Mr. Longdon has money, judiciousness, and an unappeased and unfinished love for Lady Julia, whose memory serves as a standard for fastidious decorum and civilized reciprocity—none of it to be found in present-day London, least of all in Mrs. Brook's drawing room. Mr. Longdon despises Mrs. Brook and is almost preternaturally drawn to Nanda. Though Lady Julia was beautiful and Nanda is not, he is overcome by what he takes to be a magical likeness. In Nanda, Lady Julia is nearly restored for him—except that Nanda is a modern young woman with access to the great world; she knows what Lady Julia in her girlhood would never have been permitted (or perhaps would never have wished) to know.

The ground on which *The Awkward Age* is spread—and woven, and bound, and mercilessly knotted—is precisely this: what a young woman ought or ought not to know, in a new London that "doesn't love the latent or the lurking, has neither time nor sense for anything less discernible than the red flag in front of the steam-roller," as Vanderbank cautions Mr. Longdon. "It wants cash over the counter and letters ten feet high. Therefore you see it's all as yet rather a dark question for poor Nanda—a question that in a

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way quite occupies the foreground of her mother's earnest little life. How *will* she look, what will be thought of her and what will she be able to do for herself?" Nanda at eighteen, having come of age (Mrs. Brook, for all her shaving of years, can no longer suppress this news), is ready to be brought down—from the schoolroom, so to speak—to mingle among the denizens and fumes of Mrs. Brook's nether realm. "I seem to see," James complained in his Notebook, ". . . English society before one's eyes—the great modern collapse of all the forms and 'superstitions' and respects, good and bad, and restraints and mysteries . . . decadences and vulgarities and confusions and masculinizations and femininizations—the materializations and abdications and intrusions, and Americanizations, the lost sense, the brutalized manner . . . the general revolution, the failure of fastidiousness." And he mourned the forfeiture "of nobleness, of delicacy, of the exquisite"—losses he connected with "the non-marrying of girls, the desperation of mothers, the whole alteration of manners . . . and tone, while our theory of the participation, the *presence* of the young, remains unaffected by it."

Nanda, in brief, still unmarried at twenty, becomes, by virtue (or, one might say, by vice) of her saturation in her mother's circle, unmarriageable. The Duchess has reared little Aggie on a different scheme—the strict continental preservation of her purity, mental and other. Little Aggie is consequently a marvel of protected innocence and ignorance, decorative and inutile, "like some wonderful piece of stitching." She is "really the sort of creature," Vanderbank offers, that Nanda "would have liked to be able to be." And Mrs. Brook lightly yet chillingly notes, "She couldn't possibly have been able . . . with so loose—or, rather, to express it more properly, so perverse—a mother."

Nanda's mother's looseness and perverseness is pointed enough; she knows her daughter is in love with Vanderbank, but means to keep hold of him for herself. Vanderbank, in any event, is useless as a potential husband—he has no money. Mitchy has both money and hope, and is perpetually in pursuit of Nanda. But fond though she is of him, Mitchy—a free balloon, a whimsical cynic, dotingly unconcerned, endlessly kind, all without being rooted in serious discrimination—is for Nanda literally untouchable. She will not so much as allow him to kiss her hand. Mitchy, she tells Mr. Longdon, is "impossible." Whom, then, will Nanda marry? In surroundings thickened by innuendo and conspiracy, Mr. Longdon, man of probity, himself descends to insinuation and plot—though he might think of these as inference and discretion. In combination with the Duchess, he cooks up the idea of inducing Vanderbank to marry Nanda. Despite the delicacy that veils his intent, it crudely comes down to money: Mr. Longdon will make it worth Vanderbank's while to propose to Nanda. After which, hearing of Mr. Longdon's scheme, Mitchy will relinquish Nanda (Nanda has herself urged Mitchy on Aggie), and the Duchess, finally, will have a clear field to sweep him up for her immaculate little ward. Shoemaker's offspring or no, Mitchy is a prize promising strings of pearls.

Aggie, wed to Mitchy, turns instantly wild. What was yesterday a *tabula rasa* grows hectic overnight with prurient scribblings. But under Mrs. Brook's reign (and London practice), a sullied Aggie is acceptable, predictable, even conventional. The Duchess is not simply calm. She is smug. Aggie, married, is promptly expected to know whatever there is to know of sexual heat, deceit, the denigration of husbands, the taking of lovers, the scufflings of wives. There is no surprise in any of it. English rules apply: abdications and intrusions, revolution and the failure of fastidiousness—as long as the wedding is past. Postnuptial contamination troubles no one.

Nanda's is a different case. She is tainted and unmarried. "If Nanda doesn't get a husband early in the business," the Duchess advises Mr. Longdon, "she won't get one at all. One, I mean, of the kind she'll take. She'll have been in it over-long for *their* taste." "Been in what?" Mr. Longdon asks. "Why in

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the air they themselves have infected for her!" the Duchess retorts. The infection is carried by the clever young men who, "with intellectual elbow-room, with freedom of talk," hang about Mrs. Brook's drawing room, putting their hostess "in a prodigious fix—she must sacrifice either her daughter or . . . her intellectual habits." And the Duchess crows: "You'll tell me we go farther in Italy, and I won't deny it, but in Italy we have the common sense not to have little girls in the room." Yet Nanda is far from being a little girl. "Of course she's supposedly young," the Duchess pursues, "but she's really any age you like: your London world so fearfully batters and bruises them."

In the end Vanderbank declines to marry Nanda, not even for profit. She delights him; he admires her; he may even adore her; and he is certainly not in love with her mother. Nanda, on her side, seemingly ignorant of Mr. Longdon's bribe (though she is ignorant of nothing else), longs for Vanderbank's proposal. On a lyrical summer afternoon, it appears about to come; finally it does not. Nanda is "infected": she knows too much. Superficially, one may protest fashionable London's double standard—excessive worldliness does not interfere, after all, with the marital eligibility of young men. And the argument can be made—it *is* made—that, if Vanderbank cannot marry without money, he cannot marry with it either; perhaps he scruples to wed on means not his own. But it is not Mr. Longdon's bribe that Vanderbank finds impossible. It is Nanda herself, Nanda in her contamination. Nor is the infection he intuits in her merely social worldliness, however alarming that worldliness may be.

Nanda's infection is more serious than that. Her knowing pestilential things heard and seen in her mother's salon is not the whole source and sum of her malady. What might have stopped at taintedness through oversophistication has, since the arrival of Mr. Longdon—to whom she has passionately attached herself—deepened into another order of contagion. Behind the comedy, a seal lifts from over the void; the sacred terror is seeping into the tale. A gentleman of integrity, universally understood as such, Mr. Longdon begins to draw after him a gradual toxicity, screened by benevolence. Nanda speaks affectionately of his "curious infatuation." She is herself curiously infatuated: "I set him off—what do you call it?—I show him off," she tells Vanderbank, "by his going round and round as the acrobat on the horse in the circle goes round the clown." And she acknowledges that her conversations with Mr. Longdon explore "as far as a man and a woman can together." To her mother she explains, "I really think we're good friends enough for anything." "What do you call that then," Mrs. Brook inquires, "but his adopting you?" And another time Mrs. Brook wonders whether this "little fussy ancient man" is attempting to "make up to" her daughter.

But the bond between Mr. Longdon and Nanda is more mysterious than any December-May flirtation, and it is assuredly not an adoption. It is true that Mr. Longdon pursues, he courts, he possesses. He takes Nanda away to his country house for a long stay. And finally he takes her to live with him permanently. Still, it is not an adoption, not a liaison, not anything like a marriage. It may be intended as a salvation: Nanda must be removed from Mrs. Brook's polluting household; Nanda, infected, is not marriageable. Mrs. Brook is privy to the fact of Mr. Longdon's bribe (Vanderbank has tattled to her), and though it may (or may not) portend her losing Vanderbank as lover, nothing could gratify her more. "I can't help feeling," she observes, "that something possibly big will come of Mr. Longdon." "Big" means, in this lexicon, money; and when the bribe to Vanderbank fails, Nanda, for want of an alternative falling under Mr. Longdon's protection, decidedly *does* fall into money.

She also falls into a peculiar aura: the aura of James's post-*Guy Domville* mood. James endowed Mr. Longdon not only with his own house, but with his own age, and with his own intimations of mortality and loss. To Nanda Mr. Longdon bursts out: "Oh, you've got time—you can come round again; you've a margin for accidents, for disap-

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pointments and recoveries: you can take one thing with another. But I've only my last little scrap." Mr. Longdon, one surmises, is here a mirror for certain darkening aspects of James himself. And so, interestingly, is Nanda, whose early self-recognition—"I shall never marry"—is a version of James's own youthful announcement: "I am too good a bachelor to spoil." The price of being so good a bachelor was a latter-day profundity of loneliness, and in his later years—though there was no Lady Julia in James's past on which to hang a present attachment—there were sentimental yearnings toward a whole series of engaging and gifted young men. The journalist Morton Fullerton (who became Edith Wharton's lover for a time) was one of them; Hendrik Andersen, a sculptor, was another. A third, who struck James as especially endearing, was Jonathan Sturges. Sturges, crippled by polio in childhood, was an American residing in England, "full of talk and intelligence, and of the absence of prejudice, . . . saturated with London, and with all sorts of contrasted elements in it, to which he has given himself up." This account of Sturges, appearing in one of James's letters, might easily be a portrait of Nanda. During the course of composition of *The Awkward Age*, which James was just then serializing for *Harper's*, Sturges was received with tender hospitality in Lamb House, and remained for many weeks. Nanda's visit to Mr. Longdon in his house in Suffolk (Lamb House is in Sussex) similarly lasts a number of weeks. The charming young men who so much appealed to James in this desolate period may have turned up, in Nanda, as a kind of imagined solution to isolation and despair. In real life, the charming young men came and went. In the novel, Nanda will move in and stay forever.

But *The Awkward Age* offers no solution after all. Nanda's ultimately going to live with Mr. Longdon is—for James's time and for our own—a serious anomaly. Nanda has twice been the subject of a bribe—once with Vanderbank, and again with her parents, who are only too glad to see that Mr. Longdon, by taking her in, really *is* doing something "big" for her. There is nothing honorable in Vanderbank's refusal of Mr. Longdon's bribe, and there is nothing straightforward in that refusal, which is never directly spoken. Vanderbank, pleasing everyone and no one, simply drifts away. He has the carelessness of consummate indifference; what is too tangled, or too demanding, can have no claim on him. He will never come through. "There are things I ought to have done that I haven't," he reluctantly tells Nanda in their brief last meeting. "I've been a brute and I didn't mean it and I couldn't help it." Moments before this admission, he sums it all up: "The thing is, you see, that *I* haven't a conscience. I only want my fun."

Mr. Longdon himself, presumably a man of acute conscience, does not escape corruption. Entering a corrupt community—a bribable community—he uncovers in himself an inclination to offer bribes. For Nanda's parents, the thing is more flagrant than a bribe. Mrs. Brook has, beyond question, sold her daughter to a rich man who will undoubtedly make her his heir. Mrs. Brook's acquiescence in Nanda's removal confirms the smell of the marketplace: plainly she would have declared against Nanda's going off with a "little fussy ancient man" who was poor. Mr. Longdon, in consequence, has succeeded in buying for his empty house a young woman nearly a third his age—and no matter how benign, or rescuing, or salvational this arrangement may appear to him, it is at bottom a purchase transaction, intended to assuage his lonely need. The young woman he purposes to protect will be sequestered from society on the premise that she is anyhow unmarriageable; on his account (even if he supposes it to be on *her* account) she will be foreclosed from the turnings and chances of a life beyond his own elderly precincts.

But Nanda has been brought to Mr. Longdon's house for still another reason: the revenge of love and the revenge of hate. Love of Lady Julia, hatred of Mrs. Brook. If Lady Julia in all her loveliness once passed him by, two generations afterward he is in possession of her grandchild. "I'm a hater," he says

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bluntly, reflecting on the decline of the standard that once made a "lady." In secluding Nanda from her mother's reach, he is trumpeting his contempt for Mrs. Brook: private hatred becomes public scorn. Nanda, for her part, goes with him willingly. She is complicit in the anomaly of their connection; she is the instrument of her own retreat. It is not the money—the being provided for—that lures Nanda; it is the strangeness, and, above all, the surrender.

For Nanda, Mr. Longdon's house holds out a suicidal peace: renunciation, a radical swerving from hope. Agreeing to enter that house of relinquishment (and moribund refinement)—this time never again to leave it—she is hurtled into a final storm of grief. Long ago, Mr. Longdon lost Lady Julia. Now Nanda has lost Vanderbank. They are matched in desolation.

> It burst from her, flaring up in a queer quaver that ended in something queerer still—in her abrupt collapse, on the spot, into the nearest chair, where she choked with a torrent of tears. Her buried face could only after a moment give way to the flood, and she sobbed in a passion as sharp and brief as the flurry of a wild thing for an instant uncaged; her old friend meantime keeping his place in the silence broken by her sound and distantly—across the room—closing his eyes to his helplessness and her shame. Thus they sat together while their trouble both conjoined and divided them.

Here James, in suddenly "going behind," momentarily abandons his "few grave, rigid laws" of dramatic restraint. It is as if, in this outburst of bereavement, the idea of helplessness and shame cannot be prevented from pressing forward, willy-nilly, from the cobwebbed backstage dark. The sacred terror is at last flung straight in the face of the tale. Not only helplessness and shame, but corruption; callousness; revenge; sexual displacement. Nanda displaces (or replaces) Lady Julia; beyond the novel's enclosure she may displace—or mask—James's endearing young men who come and go. There are, besides, incestuous hints: the young woman who might have been her protector's grandchild is intimately absorbed into the days and nights of his house. Her parents have abdicated. Her mother has sold her. The man she hoped to marry will not have her, even for a fortune. The man who takes her in, troubled by secret fevers and unthreshed motives, is sunk in a web of confusion; the young woman represents for him a half dozen identities, relations, unwholesome resolutions. And she, in joining him, has gone to bed, in effect, for life—as a penalty, or perhaps in penance, for knowing too much.

A panicked scenario. How much of it did James know? Did the teller penetrate to the bowels of the tale? The tale, in any case, penetrates—or decodes—the teller. The mosaic fly-eye of the narrative assembles all the shards and particles of James's chronicle of crisis, glimpse after glimpse, and sweeps them up, and compiles and conflates them into one horrendous *seeing*—James in his aging forlornness, in a house devoid of companionship and echoing with his sister's "Alone!"; Fenimore's wild crash; Alice's burial-in-life; the return of his father's "damnèd shape" and its fatal influences. And what was that shape if not James himself, at the crest of a life delivered over wholly to art, helpless on the stage on the evening of January 5, 1895, the crown of his genius thrown brutally down? "Thus they sat together while their trouble both conjoined and divided them." Divided, because James in his domicile, unlike Mr. Longdon, is alone, and will always be alone. Conjoined, because James is at once both Mr. Longdon and Nanda. But surely more than either or both. These two have been dropped into a pit. James is the pit's master, its builder and evoker.

After the cataclysmic turning point of *Guy Domville*, hidden knowings are everywhere in James—notably in *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and "The Turn of the Screw," and culminating in the last great pair of conspiratorial works, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). The recurrence, in his own sensibility, of the paternal vasta-

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tion, the recognition of an immutable deprivation ("*the essential loneliness of my life*"), the nearby explosions of suicide and self-immolation, the "horrible hours" themselves—all these pitchforked James out of the Victorian and into the modern novel. He broke down both social and narrative forms and plummeted, sans the old fastidiousness (and optimism), into the smoldering detritus of exhausted ways. It is probable that *The Awkward Age* is a novel that knows far more than its author knew, and holds more secrets of panic, shame, helplessness, and chaos than James could candidly face. But it was this work that crucially and decisively pried open the inmost door to the void. After which, released from glimpse into gaze, James could dare as Conrad dared, and as Kafka dared.

At the climax of his powers Henry James looked freely into the Medusan truth, he snared the unconscious. "Make him *think* the evil," he said, soliciting the unprepared nineteenth-century reader as the twentieth came near (a century that was to supply unthinkable evil), "make him think it for himself." And in the end—anarchy loosed upon the world, and pitilessness slouching toward him—James thought it for himself.

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A transparent world: the notebooks of Paul Klee

by Deborah Rosenthal

Praising Paul Klee in his short, brilliant "Eulogy" published six years after the Swiss artist's death in 1940, the French Surrealist painter André Masson writes in the present tense. Not surprisingly: it is often in the present tense that artists refer to the artists who are their masters, since the work is constantly alive, and the artist is subsumed in the work. When Masson (teaching us Klee's work as he eulogizes him) remarks that Klee "communicates what is communicable in a secret, he does not disdain to teach," he is in part referring to Klee's role as a master of the Bauhaus in Weimar and then in Dessau, Germany. What Masson says of Klee is to be borne out by evidence Masson never saw but intuited from glimpses: the corpus of Klee's voluminous teaching notebooks, recording a decade and a half of his teaching the principles of form-making, primarily at the Bauhaus. The notebooks and other pedagogical writings, posthumously edited by Jürg Spiller with the help of Klee's widow, were originally published in German; later they appeared in English in two volumes, brought out by George Wittenborn, called *The Thinking Eye* (1961) and *The Nature of Nature* (1973). These large books comprised a few freestanding essays, a selection from Klee's Bauhaus lectures (for a number of years he lectured for two hours weekly), his diagrams, problems he set his classes, subsequent discussions of their solutions, notes transcribed by students, and, finally, throughout the volumes, apposite Klee pictures set directly alongside the discussion of their structural basis. The recent republication of these long out-of-print volumes restores to us the opportunity to overhear how Klee taught "what is communicable in a secret."[1]

After twenty years of studying these volumes, I now think that Masson (who, with his stipend from his dealer, Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, never had to teach) if anything may have understated the importance of Klee's teaching, both to us and to the painter himself. Without the 1920 invitation from the Bauhaus masters, without the decade of relative security in his teaching position there—and possibly too without the pressure on Klee to teach as much as he did, to the point of diverting his attention from his own work—there might not have been so sustained a statement of the structural basis of abstraction as these notebooks give us. For what drove Klee to reveal what is explained and illuminated in these volumes was not only the ever-present, familiar mystery of his own work (which most artists try to explicate at some time or other) but also the continual appearance in his classrooms of relative beginners to woo. Klee's interest in his students—his love for them, one might

1 *Paul Klee Notebooks*, edited by Jürg Spiller. *Volume I: The Thinking Eye*, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim (541 pages). *Volume II: The Nature of Nature*, translated from the German by Heinz Norden (454 pages). Overlook Press, $250 the set.

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say—is almost totally disinterested, inseparable from his love for painting and his engagement with its most fundamental problems. The notebooks have been marvelously edited to reflect the meandering, spiral path of Klee's thought as he goes back over ideas that reappear and reappear; they should not be read straight through. Klee often spoke of the work of art as a work of becoming or genesis; in these pages one does not see the student *results* of Klee's teaching; one feels them, instead, as the presence of sparks struck off the sharp flint of his mind. Potentiality itself was his inspiration, in the classroom as in the studio.

Klee had already, almost a decade before beginning to teach at the Bauhaus, taught himself the fundamentals of an art of metaphoric abstraction. Probably many more people have read his popular early diaries (which end in 1918) than have read the teaching notes; there in his diary entries they could find a rather Faustian young expressionist in search of a structural expression that could embody his warring impulses toward classicism and romanticism. By 1918, Klee had already written a draft of an essay which he called his "Creative Credo," on which he based some of his early courses at the Bauhaus. Published in a book of artists' writings during his first year at the Bauhaus (and included as part of the expository core of *The Thinking Eye*), this is an astonishingly lucid parable about drawing as the foundation of Klee's oeuvre. "Told" as a drawing-in-progress, the "Creative Credo" should be taken as a sort of summum-before-the-fact of Klee's lifework as an artist-teacher; it is the key that unlocks the door to Klee's mature work. Whether one merely reads it, or reads it and draws what Klee draws (as I have done with my own students), the "Credo" gives the reader not only a hands-on experience of Klee's teaching method but also a precise literary version of the process by which Klee created his pictures.

In the main section of the essay, the artist invites the reader to "take a little journey to the land of better understanding"—the land of metaphor, in fact. The conceit of the journey proceeds by the matching of each of the graphic similes with its equivalent in words; for example,

> On the other side [of a river] we meet a man of like mind, who also wants to go where better understanding is to be found. At first we are so delighted that we agree (convergence), but little by little differences arise (two separate lines are drawn). A certain agitation on both sides (expression, dynamics, and psyche of the line).

The little journey (it takes up only about a page and a half of text) is as dazzling a shower of periphrasis as an eighteenth-century poem; Klee throws out a metaphor and then weaves one side of it into another metaphor.

> We cross an unploughed field (area traversed by lines), then a dense wood. [My companion] gets lost, searches, and once even describes the classical movement of a running dog. I am no longer quite calm either: another river with fog (spatial element) over it. But soon the fog lifts. Some basket-weavers are returning home with their carts (the wheel). Accompanied by a child with the merriest curls (spiral movement). Later it grows dark and sultry (spatial element). A flash of lightning on the horizon (zigzag line). Over us there are still stars (field of points).

Drawing is the means by which all things are made comparable to one another.

At the end, this Proustian journey turns out to have taken place—of course—in memory, and before sleep, "memories . . . come back to us. . . . Spots. Dots. Smooth surfaces. Dotted surfaces, shaded surfaces. Wavy movement. Constricted, articulated movement. Countermovement. Network and weaving. Brickwork, fish-scales. Solo. Chorus. A line losing itself, a line growing stronger (dynamics)." Klee had found his means; he shows us here what Wallace Stevens observes: "Poetry is almost incredibly one of the effects of analogy."

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If the "Creative Credo" is virtuosic, a bravura performance, the teaching style that Klee developed during the Bauhaus years, reflected throughout the notebooks, shows us a Klee who is methodical, thorough; perhaps a bit—Swiss? German?—in that regard. In a letter quoted in the Introduction to *The Thinking Eye*, Klee writes home to his wife, Lily, that he has completely written out a forthcoming lecture so as not to say anything "irresponsible"; he assigns formal problems with long titles. Although this style may have come to be associated with the Bauhaus pedagogical style that spawned American art-school curricula, neither the substance nor the importance of Klee's pedagogy ought to be attributed to the nature of the Bauhaus itself. I think the programmatic holism of the Bauhaus must have worn on this man, who in another letter home wearily describes his being obliged to start off by teaching bookbinding. Klee's was a large intellect, almost entirely devoted to the problems of painting. Painting absorbed him profoundly, and what he has to teach is a more profound and complex outgrowth of his own work than would be possible with lesser teachers. Unlike many of those who have taught ostensibly "Bauhaus"-based courses in basic design, Klee himself did not give problems or discuss issues that could not yield good, even great pictures: there was, in his class, no such thing as an exercise *per se*. Out of painting—his own painting—arose classroom problems out of which, in turn, could arise complex and full works of art.

Artistic procedure represents the prehistory of the primal scene enacted in the studio: through his procedure, the artist arranges to imagine, to conceive. In the studio classroom, the artist-teacher sets procedure for his students so as to help them arrive at pictorial structures. All pictorial structure is a way of mediating between the flux of the world—as seen or imagined—and the flat surface of the blank page or canvas. Whenever and wherever artists have found ways to measure the physical and psychological distances between themselves and the object, the object has become the *subject*; we name different pictorial structures still life, landscape, figure painting after their *subjects*.

Klee, though, expressed complete agreement with Kandinsky's dictum that in their new expression, "the work of art becomes the subject." In the form-world to which Klee introduced his students, he sets forth neither things (usually associated with representation) nor no-thing (sometimes associated with abstraction) as the subject of the work of art. Klee's procedure, unlike that of other artist-teachers, requires neither the room with the still-life objects arranged in it for students to contemplate weeks on end, nor the totally blank white rectangle of canvas onto which students are asked to "improvise" rapidly, avoiding contemplation in order to arrive at some essential form. Although the first of these two versions of artistic procedure may be more productive, the two are not so far apart as they may seem; the fixity with which the artist positions himself vis-à-vis the world is the key condition of such procedures.

How unlike other artist-teachers Klee was becomes apparent with the very first word —"chaos"—with which the editor has chosen to open *The Thinking Eye*. (The implication is that Klee began his course this way.) Here is Klee's idea of "first things" for the student artist: "Chaos," Klee writes, "as an antithesis is not complete and utter chaos, but a locally determined concept relating to the concept of the cosmos." What daring there is in this formulation! Klee's language is abstract, but not empty: by beginning with chaos, he introduces an idea of procedure in which no actor is in an absolutely fixed position. In fact, Klee acts as an artistic Copernicus: he inverts the positions required for the act of creation, so that it is the artist himself who moves, and finds himself indeed in motion in relation to the motion of the rest of the earth—most often, most productively, in opposition to it. The motion of the artist is defined, not as the empty gesture of the wrist or arm but as the movement of the eye, that is, a shift in one's view of things. As Klee wrote in the "Creative Credo": "Now

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the relativity of visible things is made clear."

The proper subjects of an art such as Klee's are processes and functions rather than entities. With all other great artists, Klee would say that nature is the teacher: the lessons he draws from it, though, force his students to consider the way nature acts at least as much as the way it appears. One week in 1923, for instance, while teaching "The energy centre, The irritated point as latent energy, Motivation for form-creation and articulation . . . ," Klee, rather than setting up a still life of apples for the class to draw, poses this problem: "Drawing apples. a) longitudinal section b) cross-section c) spatial three-dimensional drawing. The apple [from blossom to fruit]." In the "Creative Credo," we find an early version of this assignment: "An apple tree in blossom, the roots, the rising sap, the trunk, a cross section with annual rings, the blossom, its structure, its sexual functions, the fruit, the core and seeds. An interplay of states of growth."

The whole world, as Klee presents it to his students, is transparent. As a student himself, he had felt the necessity to look literally under the skin: he went beyond the work of drawing from the model and took himself off to the medical-school dissecting rooms, where he drew what he saw exposed by the knife. From that early experience of analysis Klee went on to learn the more crucial lessons of *pictorial* analysis to be drawn from the skeletal images of Analytic Cubism and the condensations of Fauve color. And, too, he had placed motion, and the time element, at the heart of his form-making, so that in 1923, after he teaches "drawing apples," he has his students consider *his* anatomy of the human body: hoping to understand the living rather than the dead body, the body in motion rather than in the stillness of death, he "dissects" not to locate discrete organs but to emphasize the interaction of systems—digestion, blood circulation, muscle movement, and so on. He takes them up one by one, finally to synthesize his human figure as a juxtaposition of them all.

By the time he began his teaching, Klee had already worked out the way such comparative analysis—such metaphoric structure—enabled him to arrive at what he called the "inner nature of reality" in his work. This truth, though essential, was not limited or reductive. On the contrary, in the classroom Klee could prove—using, as he did, his own paintings as examples—that metaphor produces variety. He might have shown, for instance, a "total abstraction" like *Blossoming* of 1934, where there is nothing but colored squares, alongside *Tree Nursery* of 1929, with its rows of little trees—both to illustrate the same processes of plant growth. He teaches his students not to close their eyes to any of the serried layers of life—a plant's root system, the Platz of a small German town, harmonies in music—but, by coming close enough to analyze them, lovingly, endlessly, to subsume them all in pictures. Although Klee is sometimes admiringly spoken of as a sort of Biedermeier botanist, working away in a cozy little room on his little mosses, the notebooks help prove that he is much more than that—Klee the artist-teacher is a morphologist of all reality, teaching us to create forms that may truly be said to be *original*. The scope of his teaching—by turns psychological, philosophical, philological, practical, art-historical—incredibly, accurately reflects the amazing range of metaphors in his painting.

Organic nature is one of Klee's favorite subjects for study, but he is a cultured man and a cosmopolite as well: in such paintings as the symbolic still life called *Around the Fish* (1926) or the little cityscape entitled *Town Square Under Construction* (1923), students could see other applications of Klee's paradigm of growth as pictorial structure. If he looks at inanimate nature—architecture, or still-life objects, or even ancient symbols—then, Klee teaches, the artist must show us his faceted relationship to those things. Klee indeed moves "around the fish"—he shows us simultaneously that central creature's filleted anatomy and its scaly exterior; its parsley bed is ocean growth, its dish also an ocean. Finally the several aspects of the fish add up as do the abstract signs and masks

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surrounding it: the fish is Symbol. When Klee teaches his students something about architecture, he is not content until he has posed ground-plan against elevation views—which in his *Town Square* dangle from either end of the same merry line that arabesques through the pictured town.

Klee shifts back and forth, in the notebooks, between demonstrations of how form comes into being as a result of analysis and specific instances of the interaction of forces in a work of art. But always, he is concerned to show his students the process rather than one set of specific results. Throughout the panoply of examples he begs them not to "slavishly copy," he always emphasizes the "pure pictorial relations" from which they can construct the whole world. Analyzing first the basic building blocks of all picture-making, Klee traces the plane back to its source as a point that moved to a line, thence to many lines that configured the plane; he compares the character of the linear energies that resolve into a triangle with those that result in square or circle; then he further pursues the concept of the outer contour as a result of the inner energies of the form; and vice versa. When Klee proceeds through the dialectic process to synthetic form, he often asks the students to imagine the skin or surface of two separate forms as glass. The better to see the interpenetration of the two: the product of this fertilization is a new, composite form bearing the traces of both parents. Klee taught this fundamental principle of transparency very early on in his courses—thus he passed on his own first lessons in structure, from Robert Delaunay's 1912 *Windows* that turned the Cubist scaffolding into abstraction. Klee himself used this essential transparency in some of the richest of his metaphors. In a group of drawings of heads, Klee has one set of drawing conventions (perceptual) coexist with another (conceptual-childlike) within the same contours; we come to experience not only a marriage of planes but, finally, the very process by which style is engendered (the artist himself becomes transparent).

Although Klee seems not to have discussed his artistic sources in class, his thoroughgoing analysis of pictorial structure, like all radical methods, sends us back to root causes. His aged paint surfaces often tip us off: even as Klee teaches us to "see through" surfaces, he analyzes the surface itself. Granted a warp and weft, the opaque surface not only expresses energies and tensions in the plane, but also opens to our view the conceptual legacy of ancient mosaics, Islamic pattern, Pointillism, and so on. When Klee analyzes perspectival systems devised to represent deep space, he emphasizes the flat plane as fulcrum for incursions into depth; figures and objects seen from multiple viewpoints result in a timeless yet not static representation harking back to monumental arts of the ancient past. These are only a few of Klee's subjects; the list is vast and is, in any event (as Klee might say), meant to be only a suggested list.

Klee's lifework as an artist-teacher was a happy one—how many people would describe themselves as "busy as a bee" and *not* mean they were content? He knew what he thought, was able to express it, and for a long time had a receptive audience. Yet no teacher, however concise, can entirely escape the slight queasiness that comes with the thought that his students may misconstrue his meaning. There are such moments strewn here and there through the pages of the notebooks—Klee warning the students not to "memorize" a chart; Klee repudiating a student's remarking optical effects in a certain arrangement of colored spots in a Klee painting; and the wonderful (and to this day rather daunting to me) pages-long discussion of a "faulty" solution to a class problem. Klee warns the student that his forms, like nuns and monks, may live cloistered next door to each other but no progeny will result.

But there is one warning Klee issues that may have had less importance to his students in the Bauhaus than it does for us today. On a page of the notes subtitled "Purity is an abstract realm," he writes: "To be an abstract painter does not mean to abstract from

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naturally occurring opportunities for comparison, but, quite apart from such opportunities, to distil pure pictorial relations." This is simple, and clear, but in the years since Klee taught it, abstraction has all too often been regarded as the product of simplification or reduction only. These volumes are ample testimony to the differences between analysis and mere reduction.

The notebooks of Paul Klee present the means to the vision realized in his oeuvre—one might regard them as a sort of teacher's handbook to his work as a teacher of painting. Klee's oeuvre can teach us all we need to know about it, but, graciously, Klee turns himself inside out so that we may see quite clearly how everything came about. Klee once commented, in his youth, that there was no rush; when you knew what you wanted, you could wait. In his maturity, he knew his art to be seminal; and his notebooks, now a part of his oeuvre, wait patiently for more of the many who admire him to learn how to emulate him. Open these notebooks; this great teacher will always accept new students.

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Poems *by Leslie Norris, Wyatt Prunty, Michael Heffernan & Andrew Hudgins*

Bridal Veil Falls, early winter

The season's freeze has locked the waterfall,
its wavering fluid, into a cold permanence.
Last arcs of free spray, crystallized
in mid-air, are scattered among the stones.
Here is a preserved droplet, a Victorian stopper,
which will not melt for months. Water is held,
as these lines hold under the bite of words.
The wind is the one sound, hissing
into the crevice over the quiet ice.

For seventy hardening seasons I've watched
the stopping of waterfalls. Some of the time
I knew and perhaps understood how water
changed in winter, what happened to molecules,
how the structures of elements could petrify
in a night from bounding liquid to
an obdurate smoothness. Not any longer.
All that's confusing now. I am content
to watch the world turn cold with its old grace.

Soon younger men will come, active, dressed
against ice, with crampons and pitons, coils
of nylon rope, looking up quite differently
from the river bed. They'll wear their red
windproofs on the pallor of the ice,

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search for fingerhold and toehold, secure
their spiked boots, begin to climb.
It's grim work. At first one sees them progress
with a quick elegance, straight up, few overhangs.

But soon they must steady, take the ice axe
from its holster, with brisk hacks
of the blade cut steps out of the sliding
fall, blocks of cold spoil dropping
to the valley floor, skittering down.
They'll pull themselves up to the line
of sky above them, the canyon's edge.
What then? No axe will chop footholds
in that thin air. They won't fly, I can tell them.

—*Leslie Norris*

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Cousins, brothers, sisters

When I was five and said I'd seen an angel,
They said it was the Phantom waiting for me
Because I rivaled him in ugliness.
Jealous, he was hiding in the angle

Of the shadow of my bedroom door;
Or he was standing in the upstairs hall,
Patient, silent, and invisible
To anyone he was waiting for.

That summer every night was filled with losses.
When I was sent upstairs alone to bed,
I stared on vacancies—long shadowed halls
With doors ajar, dark windows, distant voices.

Now that I've seen death's ugliness,
Dyeing us in the many shades he takes,
I know I watched in awe, that sleep came on
From dark to darker emptiness,

While the voices down the stairs or up the hall
Talked on awhile, then paused, then stopped,
As the others too took their darkened beds
And the house unfolded upward from us all.

—*Wyatt Prunty*

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The world of light

Whatever else we did or could have done,
or tried to think of when the time had come,
would always bring us to this place of stone,
cold and forgetfulness. There was the same
pain in our hearts as we would often have,
enough to mourn by, and in mourning thus,
we surely came to know the end of love,
its purpose and its only terminus.
And so we all were as we were before,
wanting to make of it what we could bear,
but realizing even so the lies
we liked to hear, about the galaxies,
and how the dead would send back light from them
more like a song than any requiem.

—*Michael Heffernan*

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Magpies

for Nancy

My friend has come home from a week in Lourdes
between treatments at the Cork Cancer Hospital.
She says it's wonderful what they're doing now
to keep us all alive. But something always
is out for us, don't you think? she wonders,
waiting to get us, I mean, don't you think?
Sadness surprises me as I watch her hands
lifting her thought in the air and letting it go
like a magpie leaping a ditch into a meadow.
Through the window behind her a quick light shines
among elderberry bushes with their lacy disks
turned to the wolfpack sky above the vale.
Pastoral, she says, this place is a pastoral place,
the way we used to imagine the afterlife.
But there is no afterlife, she tells me then.
Even in Ireland, we have doubts about all that.
We live here now; and afterwards, most likely,
the magpies come to leap over the ditches.

—*Michael Heffernan*

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Bright leaf

Some memories I've re-formed from photographs:
the tract house near Fort Hood and the blue Dodge
I steered while Daddy drove. Some memories
I've scripted, blocked, and filmed from family stories:
Aunt Ruth delights in telling how I'd crow
"Let Androo fix it," and jab my plastic wrench
into the toaster. And once, apparently,
I talked Jack into chewing fourteen pill bugs.
But this one I'd swear to on a hymnal:
I'm six. I'm hunkered by the state road, holding
a brown leaf fallen from a truck—tobacco,
cured bright leaf the color of the Constitution,
fragrant with red earth and perfumed with slow dying.
I held it to my face, experiencing
not rapture, transport, ecstasy, which I
have never known and don't expect to know,
but pleasure, which, with that leaf, I started learning.

—*Andrew Hudgins*

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Dog pile

Somebody'd yell, "Dog pile on Andrew!" I'd drop
my homework, and tear across the asphalt school yard,
trying to make it to the grass
as more and more boys joined the chase.
Somebody tackled me and slammed me to the hard top.
I gasped as each late boy flopped on the pile
and jarred my breath loose. Under the dog pile,
I was a little bruised, a little angry,
a little pleased they knew my name, which is just
one of the dangers of a name. "Get off me!"
I bellowed, and flailed at the slow ones. The boys
peeled off the pile and waited for me to choose.
I paused dramatically, looked around, and yelled,
"Dog pile on Hudgins!" First, everybody froze,
and then my brother started running.

—Andrew Hudgins

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Art

An American in Paris

by Jed Perl

The American painter Ellsworth Kelly came of age as an artist between 1948 and 1954, when he was in his late twenties and early thirties and was living in France. For six years, much of the time supported mainly by the seventy-five dollars a month that he received on the G.I. Bill, Kelly walked the streets of Paris, visited cathedrals around the country, went off with friends to spend weeks and months in Brittany and along the Mediterranean coast. He was bewitched by what he saw. This included not only the masterworks of ancient and modern Europe but also the little things that logic tells us are trivial but that nonetheless hold the attention of an American in Paris—the stains and irregularities on old walls, the patterns of modest iron grillworks, the piled-up café chairs, the profusion of posters in the Metro. Kelly took photographs, made drawings, and in those postwar years when modern art still cast its cool brilliant glow—when Matisse was cutting dancers out of blue-painted paper and Arp was shaping white marble into enigmatic classical nudes—in those years Kelly managed to transform the picturesque details of French life into a unique, elegant, and chaste kind of abstract art. In those few years Kelly managed to be at once a Constructivist and a flâneur, and in the series of rooms in the old West Wing of the National Gallery where "Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France" has been installed, we experience the magic of that double identity as we look at abstract paintings and constructions along with the photographs and naturalistic drawings from which some of them were derived.[1]

This is just about the best arranged and installed show I've ever seen at the National Gallery (Kelly, who was involved, has done his earlier self proud), and going through it the visitor, too, becomes a flâneur, observing the flow of images. The flâneur is supposed to be a disinterested observer, and that is what one is here, for Kelly's art has a coolness that keeps the viewer at a distance. I appreciate his paintings the way I sometimes appreciate a foreign city, as something beautiful (heart-stoppingly beautiful) and all the more beautiful because I cannot penetrate its surfaces. The show moves from rooms where the work is predominantly black-and-white or white-and-one-other-color to rooms full of brilliantly colored squares and rectangles: it is a full experience. The earlier work is derived from observed things: shadows on a staircase inspire a number of paintings, a window frame inspires others. The later works are more completely nonobjective, but the sensibility is consistent, and as a viewing experience the show works chron-

1 "Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948-1954" opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., on November 1, 1992, and remains on view through January 24, 1993. A catalogue, with essays by Yve-Alain Bois, Jack Cowart, and Alfred Pacquement, has been published by the National Gallery of Art/Prestel (207 pages, $65; $47.50 paper).

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ologically. It also works in reverse: there are eye-filling vistas, looking from one room to the next, that one will only see by starting at the end of the show and working backwards. (Did Kelly plan these backward glances? Are they a sly comment on the conventions of museum-going?) The show makes a kind of promenade of moderate-sized, well-proportioned rooms, and the work benefits from being taken in all at once. It is a kind of Constructivist landscape of the imagination that one wanders through, much as Kelly wandered the Parisian streets, which are another kind of imaginative landscape.

Anybody who has considered the art of Europe between 1860 and 1920 will take it as axiomatic that an intense absorption in the things of this world can lead in certain cases to an art that has less and less resemblance to the world around us. Kelly's early art, created at mid-century, can be seen as re-enacting a move from naturalistic observation into abstraction that first occurred in painting around the turn of the century. But there is a considerable difference between those artists who, at the turn of the century, were concentrating their attention on nature and even as they did so found themselves stepping over the brink into abstraction, and those artists who, at mid-century, went out and looked at the world with eyes attuned to the idea of abstract art. I do not, in any event, think that pictorial structure is ever something that arises, full blown, from an artist's encounters with the world.

What's striking in Kelly's early abstractions—in the best of them, that is—is how completely he subsumes what on the face of it look like rather unpromising sources into authoritative pictures. *Saint-Louis I* and *II* (both 1950) are constructions in low relief. In these two pictures, rows of horizontal lines are topped by a few four-sided shapes, and the surfaces are animated by means of a small number of elements. *Saint-Louis II*, which is all white, is composed of incised lines, and the delicate intaglio conveys, paradoxically, a quality of amplitude. Kelly understands the power of cast shadows in relief sculpture. In the exhibition we see photographs of the Parisian wall that inspired these compositions, we see the divisions of that wall and how Kelly used them as elements in his reliefs. Yet the reliefs, while derived from perception, don't have anything to do with the world around us. These works are about something very different, they're about filling space without filling it. They have their own elegance, which has to do with uncovering dynamism within stasis. They also recall a whole Constructivist tradition, works by El Lissitzky and Moholy-Nagy and Arp (whom Kelly knew in France) and Taeuber-Arp (whose work—she had died in 1943—Kelly saw at Arp's). What I think is the best single work in the whole show, a folding screen made of nine narrow vertical panels called *La Combe II* (1950-51), is derived from a photograph of shadows on a staircase. In the photograph we see how the shadows are broken by the steps, so that a single line appears on succeeding steps as a series of lines, and we can still see all this in the screen (and in a series of related paintings). But in *La Combe II* the lines are interesting in their own right. Here, as in the *Saint-Louis* compositions, we don't register any particular relation to perception. *La Combe II* is stark, lyrical, compelling: an army of jaggedly angled lines parading across an expanse of white.

Kelly's abstractions are based on the urban scene, they're abstractions of man-made forms, which are abstract to begin with. The key here is not what Kelly has seen but what he has seen fit to do with it. This is a very controlled kind of art, and there is no lessening of control when, during the Paris years, Kelly begins to do compositions that are based on ideas about randomness or chance. In 1949 John Cage and Merce Cunningham were in Paris, they met Kelly, visited back and forth, wandered through the city together, and the rest is art and/or dance and/or music history. Behind all of their experiments with chance were the experiments of the Dadaists and the Surrealists, and behind all of that was an age-old fascination with the mysteriousness of art, of which chance could be an emblem. When Kelly cut

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up a drawing into squares and randomly reassembled them, or made a painting out of squares of color, arranging them at random, he was putting parameters around accidents, he was controlling the uncontrollable. It is all very Parisian, this idea that anything goes just so long as certain conventions have been taken into account. In some of Chardin's paintings, a young man builds a house of cards or blows a soap bubble, and we're confronted with pictorial structures that are absolutely solid even though they are based on the most ephemeral experiences.

The best of Kelly's works that incorporate some element of chance strike us with their perfect elegance, and the chance is part of the elegance. When Kelly does an ink drawing of thick lines, cuts it into squares, and reassembles it in a different way, the disjuncture between the pieces creates the sensation of a split, a fault, a kind of invisible line—a very considered effect. In a painting like the blue-and-green *Meschers* (1951), which is derived from this idea, there are thus two kinds of edges: the horizontal free-form edges (that give forms their bulk and volume) and the vertical straight edges (that run from top to bottom of the painting and lock the forms into an overall design of five equal columns). The irony here is that it is the free-form edges (derived from a drawing that Kelly presumably did while fully in control) that suggest an artist who is giving up control, while it is the straight edges (derived from the arbitrary cutting and chance recomposing of the drawing) that feel most carefully controlled. In *Colors for a Large Wall* (1951), made up of sixty-four same-sized squares, each a single color, the fact that the arrangement is happenstance (if that is in fact really the case) strikes me as an irrelevancy. (In the catalogue of the 1973 Ellsworth Kelly show at the Museum of Modern Art, E. C. Goossen writes about *Colors for a Large Wall*: "The organization, aside from its square panels joined in a grid, is totally arbitrary; the juxtaposition of colors was a matter only of taste." Does Goossen mean to say that taste is arbitrary?) However *Colors for a Large Wall* got to be the way it is, this dazzling yet austere picture, with its full-blown colors shining amidst white panels, is the work of an imagination.

All artists take chances. The landscape painter, out on a sunny day, decides to keep painting as the sky fills with clouds, even though he will have to change his painting completely. He is taking a chance. Perhaps all that is happening in Kelly's case is that what is a normal part of an artistic process is becoming extraordinarily self-conscious. Kelly controls chance by making it a subject; he has an idea about letting go. The latter half of the show is basically about the hedonism of color, about color on its own, set free of everything save the containing rectangle. But the effect of freedom is quite calculated. The paintings made of joined panels, each a single color, are accompanied by a great many small studies, which demonstrate how carefully these effects of expansiveness and abandon have been prepared. Kelly has confronted chance head on, and by the end of the show nothing is left to chance.

The catalogue of the Kelly show, which was organized by Jack Cowart of the National Gallery and Alfred Pacquement of the Jeu de Paume, is quite impressive. The long chronology by Nathalie Brunet—really an essay on the life—is revealing without being in any way indiscreet, and the essays (by Cowart, Pacquement, and Yve-Alain Bois, a current star of the formalist branch of post-formalist criticism) are unusual among current catalogue copy in that they leave a reader with the happy impression that the authors actually like the work of the artist in question. Many paintings not included in the show are reproduced in color; maybe too many, for some of the strong works get swamped in the catalogue by weaker stuff, while there are also things in the catalogue that one would like to have seen in the show. This enterprise has, it seems, invigorated everybody who was involved, and they have stayed focused on the subject in ways rare in the contemporary museum, and having said that I can't help but go on to say that I suspect a hidden agenda. The show enables us to see Kelly

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from the point of view of his own beginnings, but the catalogue seems to view early Kelly from the vantage point of the 1960s, from the vantage point of Minimalism, Primary Structures, Specific Objects, and the all-American dream of an art that isn't painting and isn't sculpture.

Beneath the beautiful surfaces of this show, a show delimited by the six years of a sojourn in France, there is a life and death struggle going on, a struggle between the Old World and the New World of modern art. In Paris at the end of the 1940s, Ellsworth Kelly got to know Arp and Calder and at least visited Brancusi, and they were some of the best of what remained of the great days of modern experimentation. He also witnessed the last mad gasps of the ideological wars that had dominated modern and particularly abstract art in much of the first half of the century. He was taken up by Michel Seuphor, a painter and polemicist who at the time had much to do with setting abstract ins and outs. Kelly was glad for Seuphor's interest and steered clear of the polemics. He—and other American-in-Paris friends such as Jack Youngerman—believed that as Americans they had no part in the ideological warfare that had accompanied the birth and early years of abstract art. In February 1951, back at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Willem de Kooning had spoken of that Babel of isms—Surrealism, Futurism, Constructivism, on and on—and said, "I have learned a lot from all of them and they have confused me plenty too. . . . I am completely weary of their ideas now." With those words de Kooning announced the artistic End of Ideology. He spoke for an entire generation, a younger generation that was coming up in the 1950s.

Much of the excitement of art in New York in the 1950s—and I would include among New York artists artists who were then living in Paris—had to do with this sense that one need not subscribe to a theory, that one could mingle all the theories and then go beyond theory. The particular quality of Kelly's work circa 1950 has to do with his sense of being absolutely free of classic Constructivism (he's the modern American boy) even as he obviously cannot exist without it (he's the American boy in love with Europe). To be in Paris in those years could be to live between two worlds, and Kelly did something with that paradoxical position. The drama of the last rooms of the Kelly show is that Kelly is going as far as it is possible to go in the direction of pictorial simplification and objects-that-aren't-paintings-and-aren't-sculptures while still sustaining a vitality of expression that is related to tradition.

It is now nearly forty years since Kelly returned from Paris, began showing with Betty Parsons, and embarked on what has turned out to be a big American career. His one-or-two-color paintings and sculptures, these icons of objecthood, have their place in the ideology that has risen out of the End of Ideology. Of many recent Kellys (and good ones were on view in New York during the fall at the Castelli and BlumHelman galleries) it can be said that there is nothing wrong with them—and that that is a part (a big part) of what is wrong with them. In recent decades, while doing these hyper-simplified works, Kelly has also from time to time returned to Europe and wandered once again those ancient city streets. He has done a series of color photographs of the patterns of broken tiles on some of Gaudí's buildings in Barcelona. It is pretty clear that in Kelly's mind these broken Spanish tiles relate to his own cut and recomposed drawings. Once again Kelly is looking to picturesque Europe for a key to his purist America. My guess is that Kelly sees a fairly simple analogy between the Gaudí tile compositions and the evolution of his own work: we go from whole tiles to broken tiles and then on to a single broken tile. But what Kelly misses is precisely the glory of those Gaudí surfaces, which rests in the way that this great architect maintains a middleground where transformation is always taking place, where no possibility is ever entirely foreclosed, where nothing is quite complete. If there is any artist who demonstrates that masterpieces are built of the dazzling merger of

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complicated and perhaps ultimately irreconcilable elements, it is Antoni Gaudí.

Kelly is the opposite of Gaudí: he is an artist who finds it unbearable to admit the existence of contradictory forces. The trouble with much of Kelly's perfectly finished art—and it is already a factor in the last galleries of the National Gallery show—is that it leaves no room for the viewer. The Kelly of the early Paris years was an artist who knew that there are things in art that are (rightly) beyond the artist's control. He could take a leap, he could trust us to take a leap. To the extent that Kelly's work since the mid-Fifties is capable of moving us it is an extension of the discoveries that he made in those first years in France, when he was a young man who was reading a map of modern art which was not unlike the map of Paris. If there is a moral to be drawn from all of this it is an equivocal one, namely that sometimes an American is better off in Paris.

Exhibition notes

"Masterworks from the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
October 27, 1992—January 17, 1993

On a recent Saturday, the line for the Magritte show at the Metropolitan stretched from the exhibition's entrance through the Michael Rockefeller Wing and down the full length of the corridor with the Cypriot sculptures and Pompeiian frescos. There was no line to enter "Masterworks from the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille." Admittedly, it was the last weekend of the Magritte exhibit, while the works from Lille remain on view through mid-January, but if the aim of those patiently queuing had been aesthetic experience, they could have saved themselves a long wait. Admirers of Magritte's technique would have found real standards for bravura paint handling in Rubens's dazzling *Descent from the Cross* (1616-17). Enthusiasts for the psychological implications of Magritte's compositions would have found potent commentary on human anguish in Delacroix's dramatic *Medea About to Murder Her Children* (1838), while appreciators of Magritte's presumed sense of the absurd would have met consummate irony in Goya's searing juxtaposition of young and old women in *Time* (*c.* 1808-12) and its companion, *The Letter* (*c.* 1814-19). And more: a spectacular collection of drawings by Raphael, rock-solid Fra Bartolommeo figure studies, a David that defines French Neo-Classicism, a Géricault that does very nearly the same thing for Romanticism, a magnificent ruin of a Courbet, a Van Gogh that combines, improbably, the pastoral and the cranky.

These splendid paintings and drawings are in New York because their normal home is to be closed for a two-year renovation, but what were they doing in Lille, a medium-sized city on the Belgian border, in the first place? The Musée des Beaux-Arts was founded by Napoleon in 1801, but the city, once Flemish and only later French, was rich and powerful long before that, particularly from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth. Its wealthy inhabitants amassed works by important Flemish and French artists, many of which—the magnificent Rubens *Descent from the Cross*, for example, originally painted for the city's Capuchin convent—found their way into the museum. The extraordinary Raphael drawings in the exhibition, which range from sketches notable for their economy to fully realized compositional studies, were collected by a Neo-Classical painter, a student of David's, who spent much of his working life in Italy but left a good part of his drawing collections to the Societé des Sciences of Lille, where he was born. This tradition of high-quality acquisition has been continued by the museum, which as recently as 1990 purchased a fine "signature" Chardin—a broken loaf, a wine bottle, a slice of ham on a pewter plate, and a silver cup, in an earthy brown niche—a fitting addition to an impressive collection.

The Met's exhibition, in fact, makes the intelligence that shaped the collection as

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striking as the excellence of individual works. Rubens's monumental altarpiece with its gleaming surfaces, rich color, and glowing flesh is paired with a vigorous study (acquired in 1893) where impassioned brushstrokes and restrained hues cascade down the panel to convey unequivocally the weight of the dead Christ and the agony of His mourners. The contrast between the sketch, whose intensity derives from its facture, and the carefully finished canvas, whose drama resides in its narrative, is illuminating. Similarly, Delacroix's bare-breasted, exotic Medea "in her rage and madness," clutching a dagger and two struggling children, is accompanied by a group of lively drawings and a ferocious oil sketch that documents the evolution of his conception of the theatrical Salon offering. (These were acquired shortly after the artist's death, in the posthumous sale of his studio's contents.)

The fully illustrated catalogue, with comprehensive entries on each work, also includes provocative essays on the history of the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille, and its collections, and on the idea of the museum itself, past and present.

—*Karen Wilkin*

"Theme & Improvisation: Kandinsky & the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950," at the Dayton Art Institute, Ohio. December 12, 1992—January 31, 1993

Art exhibitions that attempt to trace the influence of an artist or style may seem a cinch to organize, but in fact they are among the most difficult to bring off successfully. When one deals with a famous style, such as Cubism, the task can be relatively easy. But when one deals with a lesser-known style based on complex aesthetic ideas—and particularly when those ideas reach their audience through poor translations—then the task becomes complex.

Maryanne Lorenz and Gail Levin met and overcame the inherent obstacles in "Theme & Improvisation: Kandinsky & the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950." The exhibition began its national tour at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., last fall and will be on view at the Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago, from February 13 through April 1, and at the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, from May 14 through August 1. The exhibition works so well, I think, largely because of the curators' careful choice of objects. One comes away with the feeling of a large lacuna properly filled.

One hears much about the influence of primitivism, Cubism, and various other styles on modern American artists but little about Kandinsky. One indication of this neglect is that the first definitive study of the artist's influence—Gail Levin's doctoral dissertation, on which much of the exhibition is based—was not undertaken until the 1970s. "Theme & Improvisation" draws attention to Kandinsky's importance, placing it in historical context.

The 1913 Armory Show first introduced Kandinsky's art to the American public. The previous year Alfred Stieglitz had published translated extracts of Kandinsky's "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" in the magazine *Camera Work*. This made Kandinsky's thinking available to artists such as Dove and Hartley, who readily embraced some of his ideas about the emotional power of color, the spiritual basis of abstraction, and the idea of music as both example and metaphor for the aims of abstract art. One of the most interesting aspects of this exhibition concerns the fate of Kandinsky's ideas among his admirers. By the 1930s, Kandinsky's ideas were widely known, but they did not always reach artists in their purest form. Pollock is thought to have absorbed Kandinsky's influence directly from the 1945 memorial exhibition at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting. But he may also have ingested them indirectly from John Graham's book *System and Dialectics of Art*, which was heavily indebted to Kandinsky's thinking.

If there is another lesson to be learned from "Theme & Improvisation," it is that an artist's proximity to a master is itself no guarantee of mastery. There are nearly one hundred works in the exhibition by roughly

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forty painters, including Marsden Hartley, Arthur G. Dove, Ilya Bolotowski, and Jackson Pollock. In their works, one can see the process of influence in action: Kandinsky's paintings and ideas were used as a tool, not as a prescription, for making art. The same cannot be said for the works of the show's many also-rans, which were surely included mostly for thoroughness' sake. If you have never seen Hilla Rebay's or Rolph Scarlett's knock-offs of Kandinsky, this is your opportunity to do so, although you will probably never want to again.

—*Eric Gibson*

"Egypt's Dazzling Sun:
Amenhotep III & His World,"
at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth.
October 24, 1992-January 31, 1993

It is always a treat to go to the Kimbell Art Museum. The elegant museum building, designed by Louis Kahn in the late 1960s, is one of the triumphs of modern architecture. And its breathtaking collection, consummately assembled by Richard Brown, the Kimbell's first director, and expanded by the current director, Edmund Pillsbury, is a study in connoisseurship and exacting taste. The Kimbell's collection is small, but almost every object is of the highest aesthetic quality. Under Mr. Pillsbury's direction, the Kimbell has increased its roster of traveling exhibitions, and these, too, have been planned and executed with great scrupulousness.

The current offering, a collection of 140 objects from Egypt's Golden Age (*c.* 1400-1300 B.C.), is no exception. The impressive stone sculptures—including several extraordinary monumental sculptures of animals and busts of the Egyptian ruler Amenhotep III—are perfectly set off by the Kimbell's travertine-lined galleries. Amenhotep III, the father of Akhenaten and grandfather of Tutankhamen, presided over a great and exceptionally prosperous empire. Like so much of Egyptian culture at the time, many of the works on view here were constructed as monuments to the ruler's glory. The effect is stunning, but for a modern spectator the panoply of magnificent ruins cannot but seem like illustrations for Shelley's poem "Ozymandias." The "shattered visage," the broken arrogance, the surviving awe—all are recapitulated many times over here: "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair."

But this exhibition also reminds us that classical Egypt's cultural achievement had other, quieter dimensions. There are dozens of small, exquisitely worked *objets*—spoons, combs, statuettes, perfume bottles, and other vessels—on view as well. Some of them—particularly some of private statuary in wood—are almost painfully sensuous. Organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art, this remarkable exhibition will travel to the Grand Palais in Paris this March. It is accompanied by an excellent catalogue, written by several hands, and published by the Cleveland Museum of Art in cooperation with the Indiana University Press.

—*Roger Kimball*

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Theater

Doing it wrong

by Donald Lyons

Which is worse—chloroforming a classic in costumed torpor or shooting it up with stylistic crack? This month, Chekhov and Büchner have been subjected to antithetical distortions on New York stages.

Chekhov's *Seagull* had two premières, the first in Saint Petersburg, in 1896, where everything went wrong. The production was rushed, to accommodate a prima donna who needed a vehicle. There were but nine rehearsals. At the last minute, the star withdrew, but her disappointed claque filled the house on opening night. The audience, mistaking the protagonist's arty bombast for Chekhov's own, took to laughing not just at the absurd but at everything. It was a disaster. "I was thrown out of Petersburg like a bomb," wrote Chekhov to Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a friend who shared his dissatisfaction with the melodramatic conventions of the Russian theater and was about to remedy the situation. In 1897, Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky founded the Moscow Art Theater, and the next year Nemirovich-Danchenko persuaded Stanislavsky, who had his doubts about the play, and the once-bitten Chekhov, to put on *The Seagull* as the fourth play in the first season of the new troupe. It actually became the third play, and it was a decisive success. A seagull became the logo of the Moscow Art Theater, Stanislavsky's naturalistic playing its signature style, and Chekhov its patron spirit.

The Seagull thus stands as the founding work for modern acting. It is also, of course, a play *about* writing and playwriting and acting, *about* the sinuous interconnectedness of life and art. As the play opens, young Konstantin has written as vehicle for his beloved, the tremulous Nina, a Maeterlinck/Symbolist monologue and is staging it one night by a lake shore. The playwrights's mother, Arkadina, a vain and jealous star, pokes fun, and her angry son stops the play. The mother-son byplay echoes that in the most famous of all mother-son and actors-on-acting plays, *Hamlet*. Arkadina's lover, Trigorin, a womanizing writer, briefly discusses the play with Nina, a potential conquest, although beloved by Konstantin. The high-minded, naïve girl wishes to discuss art; the prosaic Trigorin is only interested in the possiblility of fishing in the lake. A tension is here expressed that is to be felt through Chekhov's work—that between the beautiful sincerity of young idealism and its feckless ineptitude. By contrast the impure spirits are often the practical ones. As Vladimir Nabokov, one of *The Seagull*'s best commentators, puts it in *Lectures on Russian Literature*, "The subtle point is that though [Konstantin] has a real desire to destroy the old forms of art, he has not the talent to invent new ones to take their place. Note what Chekhov does here. What other author would have dared to make his main character—a positive character, as they say, that is, one which is expected to win the audience's sympathy—who else would have dared to make him a minor poet,

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at the same time giving real talent to the least pleasant persons of the play, to the nasty self-sufficient actress and the egotistical, emphatically professional writer?"

These wry paradoxes constitute but one thread of this difficult (and not always achieved) play, whose complexities, more than those of Chekhov's other masterworks, need very precise, very sensitive calibrations of tone if they are to make any sense at all. Stage *Uncle Vanya* or *Three Sisters* in a half-baked, monotonous way, and something—some wistful velleities—will come through, if imperfectly. Put on *The Seagull* in haste and in a gallimaufry of acting styles, and you have nothing, an evanescent puzzlement, unfocused noise. Welcome to the National Actors Theatre's version of *The Seagull*, at the Lyceum. This hybristic institution, the brainchild of mannered TV comic Tony Randall, was not up to *The Crucible* last season, and things have not gotten any better. Mr. Randall, it is overwhelmingly obvious, has not the ghost of an idea to back up, to inform this company's pretensions. He has only a Modern Drama 101 reading list and an Equity phonebook—hardly the constituents of "not only a major performing company, but a major arts institution as well." (It must be added, though, that it is difficult to imagine what such constituents would be in America today.)

In 1898 *The Seagull* inaugurated a fresh, revolutionary approach to acting. Today, the triumph of the Method, or rather the Methods, is total; it is the sole style of American public performance. Today, a revolutionary staging of *The Seagull* might necessitate a dash of cold water, a Brechtian exteriorization of the text, a farcification of it all. Instead, it is as if Konstantin directed the play himself. It has been staged with traffic-jam sluggishness and clumsiness by Marshall W. Mason, whose many presentations of Lanford Wilson might have promised at least some quicksilver sensitivity to mood. And the clogged stasis is not helped by the unhomogenized ideosyncrasies of performance. Film actor Ethan Hawke takes Konstantin at his own valuation, exhibiting a painted actorliness, stressing odd syllables, and making strange pauses. He is not so much bad as unguided, operating in a trite vein of James Dean Method brattiness. Film star Jon Voight, on the other hand, seems to be apologizing for Trigorin, taking the character too little at his own valuation; he shuffles and smoothly mumbles. Voight's presence is Trigorinish enough—handsome, tall, vain, self-regarding—but the actor wants to be loved. Buxom Tyne Daly as Arkadina was strident and shrill in a sort of Mae West frontier-saloon mode and was much criticized for lacking the grandeur of old Russia. In fact, hers was the most interesting job on stage. Sashaying back and forth in beaded, whale-bone-corseted loud outfits, hands on hips and barking affection and disdain with equal clamor, this Arkadina woke one up precisely by not being languidly, petulantly Slavic in the received manner. Daly's was not a finished performance, but the seed of something was there, and she deserves points for that Chekhovian quality—chutzpah. The rest were dim, vapid, whiny; Marjorie Bradley Kellogg's sets looked like a timbered après-ski lodge, all heavy naturalism without any edge or point. In all, being at this *Seagull* was like being at the première—the Petersburg première.

"I want to say more, but I'm too excited at the moment," was how director JoAnne Akalaitis concluded her introductory remarks to the cast and crew of *Woyzeck* on the first day of rehearsal, as reprinted in a Public Theater program insert. The whole speech is remarkably revealing, as is her very decision to reprint it whole. While I read it (she earlier says, "I'm very thrilled to have this challenge, and to be able to engage in this journey with all of you"), I kept hearing another voice, another cadence behind her words. Whom was she, doubtless unintentionally, echoing? . . . I had it! It was Norma Desmond's final monologue, as the mad movie diva, imagining she is making a comeback film, descends the staircase of her mansion into the arms of the police, in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*.

Büchner's *Woyzeck*, written around 1836

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but unproduced until 1913, is a key piece of modern theater, both in its naturalistic content and in its formal discontinuities, ellipses, and mixings of song with story. *Woyzeck*, the tale of a poor army barber driven by forces without and within to murder his unfaithful wife, was in 1991 given a sober, scholarly, and moving representation by the Jean Cocteau Repertory around the corner from the Public. They used Eric Bentley's translation and period German songs. Miss Akalaitis brings to bear upon her *Woyzeck*, in Henry J. Schmidt's translation, the stylistic vocabulary associated with the Mabou Mines troupe and familiar to Public Theater audiences from her Shakespearean and Jacobean productions there. Scorning to simulate a conceivable Germany of 1836, Marina Draghici has constructed a beetling subway station-cum-concentration camp pockmarked with fluorescent lighting and sporting a gleaming, swiveling barber's chair in chrome and a functioning shower. Choral townsfolk come on doing an angry, Busby-Berkeley-goes-to-Nüremburg tap routine. When Marie is seduced by the flashy heavy, a Drum Major, we get it in slow motion. Other heavies—a Doctor and a Captain—graduate from manic tantrums to spastic twitching to ladder-climbing. Townsfolk have bouts of Celtoid jigging, whinnying, cackling, grunting—displays reminiscent of the antics of the tavern folk in the Akalaitis *Henry IV*. A knife seller employs babyish sing-song (music by Philip Glass, lyrics by Paul Schmidt). Fluorescence to the max as Woyzeck takes the bought knife to his wife in slomo. What in Büchner was the barber's attempt to cleanse himself in a stream while the accusing folk gather around him becomes here a full-blown and solitary naturalistic modern showering, as the folk stand rigid elsewhere and the doctor and captain smack their lips about the "beautiful murder."

Woyzeck is a grim, terrible story pregnant with and prophetic of both class anger and existential despair. It is not *Faust* or *Peer Gynt*, some overstuffed classic begging for deconstruction by a smart academic dramaturge. It is *already* a fractured, modernist text and needs only comprehension and respect in order to register with eerie power. Thus, to distort, to blur, to deafen the modernism of Büchner with ugly and gimcrack postmodern gimmickry constitutes an act of malignant aggression not against bourgeois complacency blah blah blah but against Büchner. I want to say more, but I'm too depressed at the spectacle of this willed, mechanical inhumanity.

What a relief, after immoderate ambitiousness, is modest success. Frank McGuinness is a prolific Irish playwright, a writer in residence at the Abbey Theater and adapter of such classics as Lorca's *Yerma*, Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, and Chekhov's *Three Sisters* for Dublin and London stages. His new work, at the Booth, is *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, a chamber work (in all senses) about three hostages—an American, an Irishman, and an Englishman—kept chained to the walls of a Beirut cellar by unseen terrorists. The American, played with imposing earnestness by James McDaniel, is the weakest and briefest of the three men; he vanishes after the first of the two acts. His is essentially an expository function, setting up the character of the Irishman, Edward, before Edward is impinged upon by the subsequent introduction of that at-first-stock figure, the Englishman. Edward is a nomadic journalist; he has at home a wife and children, but his career has been a sort of panic flight from them. Edward's father was a similarly prickly and evasive character. A humorist and an "imaginist" (to use Jane Austen's term for Emma), Edward holds off despair and madness by wit and play and memories of home. Indeed, Edward's aggressive wit is what moves the play: "Do the Irish have foreplay?" "We invented it; it's called drink." He concocts hilarious movie scenarios, lovingly repeats the names of Dublin's suburban train stations, and bristles defensively at Michael's labeling of Irish English as a "dialect." Stephen Rea is miraculously supple, both physically and morally, as the fettered Edward; he fights to keep the mask of humor before the reality of pain. Rea's bursts of

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energy, his strainings against the bonds, make us feel the life in the man, the nearness of death for him, his growing pains. We ache with the strength of his longing for his wife and his green land. (Stephen Rea is also, but differently, excellent in the current Irish film *The Crying Game*.)

While there was no conflict, only admiration—and hence no drama—between Adam and Edward, the temperamental and cultural antipathies between Michael and Edward are growth points. Michael, the Englishman, is a widower, a devoted son of an aged mother, and a teacher of English who loves his native literature. Newly come to Beirut, he was grabbed on the street on the way to buy some pears to make pear flan for a dinner party. Like so much about Michael, this pear flan becomes a red rag to Edward. Fastidious, prissy, possibly homosexual, infantile in a particularly English way, Michael, as exquisitely realized by Alec McCowen, wins respect and admiration by his bravery, to be sure, but also by the way he draws genuine sustenance from the word, from such devotional writing as George Herbert's beautiful poem "Love," and from medieval classics like *Sir Orfeo* and *The Wanderer*. How convincingly McGuinness creates a man fortified by faith and art. Less loftily, he also treasures such snippets of Englishness as the 1977 women's final at Wimbledon in the presence of the Queen (you see what I mean by a certain childishness at once infuriating and endearing). Frank McGuinness has felt himself into both these men, and into their nascent friendship, with precision and power.

Robin Don's clever set puts the cell at an angle to the audience and interrupts the prison scenes with a starred sky. (Ella Fitzgerald sings the title Gershwin song in these breaks, so that the eye is kept busy negotiating the oblique space and taking breathers in the heavens.) Director Robin Lefèvre shows the truth of Goethe's observation about restraint bringing out true mastery; in this arena where motion is precious, almost impossible, each kinetic thrust is a delight. Frank McGuinness's wonderfully named play might perhaps be better as, might find its entelechy as, a long two-character one-acter. But what a joy to see at work artistic powers adequate to a civilizing and moving purpose.

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Reconsiderations

You don't say

by Terry Teachout

In the frenzy of 1980s-bashing that seized the cultural elite following the election of Bill Clinton last November, a highly relevant anniversary went unnoticed: *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe's first novel, turned five years old. Odd that not a single pundit took the trouble to bid farewell to the Masters of the Universe, those "mere boys, with smooth jawlines and clean arteries," who bought three-million-dollar apartments on Park Avenue and carried to work "one of those burgundy leather attaché cases that come from Mädler or T. Anthony on Park Avenue and have a buttery smoothness that announces: 'I cost $500.'"

Yet *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is not much talked about these days, even by New Yorkers. Perhaps this has something to do with the failure of the half-witted movie Brian De Palma made of it; more likely it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, the work of earnest liberals trying to persuade themselves that the 1980s really are over at last, and thus no longer worth talking about. At any rate, it is worth taking a second look at *Bonfire*, if only to see just what it was that we officially put behind us on November 3, 1992.

When I told a friend I was rereading *Bonfire*, he said, "It must be completely unintelligible by now—it was so much a product of its time and place." In fact, *Bonfire* is still perfectly intelligible, since next to nothing about New York has changed since it was written. Even now, most literate New Yorkers would probably know what you meant were you to speak of a "social X-ray" or a "lemon tart"; more to the point, they would certainly know what you meant were you to describe a local scandal as "straight out of *Bonfire*" or "a real Tom Wolfe story." *Bonfire* is, of course, the story of a WASP investment banker whose mistress accidentally runs his Mercedes over a black teenager from the Bronx, thereby placing the couple at the epicenter of a *cause célèbre* in which a freak accident is whipped into a full-blown racial incident by local politicians and the news media. There have been many such stories since 1987, starting with the Tawana Brawley case, which bore in many of its particulars an eerie similarity to the fictional events described in *Bonfire*. Indeed, New York has lately been convulsed by a quintessential Tom Wolfe story: the Crown Heights case, in which a young black man, arrested and tried for the murder of a Hasidic Jew, was acquitted on all counts by a Brooklyn jury that chose to disregard what was widely believed to have been irrefutable evidence of his guilt.

This cuts right to the knuckle. For what is a "real Tom Wolfe story" if not a grotesque public drama that rips the mask of polite evasion off the wars of ethnicity that are tearing New York apart? In this connection, it should be noted that one thing about New York has changed greatly since 1987: the evasions have become less polite. The clamps of sensitivity fascism were already starting to

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tighten when *Bonfire* was written; even though the phrase "politically correct" had yet to pass into common usage, the number of things you could say in public without being accused of racism had shrunk noticeably. Five years later, it has become even more difficult for New Yorkers to say what Tom Wolfe said in *Bonfire* about the daily hypocrisies of life in urban America and get away with it.

It's not that you *can't* say such things. Of course you can, if you're a taxi driver or a talk-radio host. It's only among the chattering classes that you dare not speak your mind. If you want to retain your good standing in artistic, academic, or political circles, you go along with the prevailing left-wing orthodoxies, even though nearly everybody who mouths them knows they are untrue. ("I never tell anyone what I'm really thinking anymore," a young writer said to me recently. "Why bother?") From time to time something dreadful happens, like Crown Heights, that causes reeking pustules of truth to burst open on the front pages. But mostly, people just lie—and, in the company of trusted friends, tell jokes. I read the other day that the collapse of Communism had caused Russian humor, once rivaled only by Jewish humor, to go to seed. Ironically, it was around the time the Berlin Wall fell that I first heard the now-celebrated feminist lightbulb joke: *Q. How many feminists does it take to change a lightbulb? A. That's not funny.* Future historians will doubtless note with interest that Russians stopped using jokes as a vehicle for covert social criticism just as Americans started to do so.

One of the few thoughtful reviews of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was Joseph Epstein's "Tom Wolfe's Vanities," originally published in this magazine. In it, Epstein talked about the literary implications of Wolfe's "anti-Left" world view: "Wolfe attributes much of the serious mischief in contemporary urban life to radical hustlers and soft-hearted (also -headed) liberal culture of a kind unwilling to admit unpleasant facts about contemporary life. . . . Without an unblinkered view of reality, there can be no realism in literature." This observation raises a very interesting question: what happens to realism in literature in a culture where you can't tell the truth? Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library keeps a scrapbook of everything written about H. L. Mencken, in many ways the Tom Wolfe of his day. Leafing through that scrapbook, I have noticed that every couple of months or so, somebody somewhere claims (correctly, I suspect) that Mencken wouldn't be able to get a newspaper job if he were alive today. Rereading *Bonfire*, I found myself thinking, over and over again, *Nobody would print* that *today*. Maybe they'd print it if Tom Wolfe wrote it; after all, his books sell, and money talks, even to liberals. (The mass-market paperback of *Bonfire* is currently in its twenty-third printing.) But if a Tommy Wolff submitted a novel saying those things, he'd get his ears pinned back, or cut off. Consider this passage from *Bonfire*. The speakers are two assistant district attorneys who work in the Bronx County Courthouse, one Italian, the other Jewish:

> "Jimmy," Andriutti said to Caughey, "did you know that Jewish guys—Larry, I don't want you to take this personally—did you know that Jewish guys, even if they're real stand-up guys, all have one faggot gene? That's a well-known fact. They can't stand going out in the rain without an umbrella or they have all this modern shit in their apartment or they don't like to go hunting or they're for the fucking nuclear freeze and affirmative action or they wear jogging shoes to work or some goddamn thing. You know?"
>
> "Gee," said Kramer, "I don't know why you thought I'd take it personally."
>
> "Come on, Larry," said Andriutti, "tell the truth. Deep down, don't you wish you were Italian or Irish?"
>
> "Yeah," said Kramer, "that way I wouldn't know what the fuck was going on in this fucking place."

Whether or not you find this exchange funny is a matter of taste, but there can be no questioning its artistic truthfulness. To have

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been around the kinds of people about whom Wolfe is writing is to know that this is precisely the way they talk. Like so much of *Bonfire*, this scene is not merely realistic, but also hyperrealistic—realistic to an almost phonographic degree. Reading it again reminded me of something Henry James said about Trollope: "Mr. Trollope has proposed to himself to describe those facts which are so close under every one's nose that no one notices them. Life is vulgar, but we know not how vulgar it is till we see it set down in his pages." Without access to a realism of this degree of specificity and honesty, it is impossible for a writer to describe New York, or America, as it really is. Yet who can imagine any New York editor allowing such things to get into print nowadays?

Not that we necessarily need honest portrayals of New York, or America, in our literature and our journalism. Instead, we can keep on blathering about how multiculturalism and affirmative action and bilingual education and Afrocentrism are turning this country into an earthly paradise—and jumping out of our skins with astonishment every time a Crown Heights occurs. Or, alternatively, we could try telling the truth. Anybody care to bet how many writers will want to do that in Bill and Hillary Clinton's America? Or what the critics will have to say about Tom Wolfe's next novel?

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

The career of V. S. Pritchett *by Joseph Epstein*
William Trevor, storyteller *by Richard Tillinghast*
Why we should read Joyce Cary *by Bruce Bawer*
The New York of Dawn Powell *by Lauren Weiner*
De Gaulle: rebel & ruler *by Harold James*
The mystery of Simenon *by Katherine Knorr*
Gjertrud Schnackenberg *by Robert Richman*
Catullus today *by Donald Lyons*

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Books

Flights of the enchanter

by Jenny Teichman

Iris Murdoch's new book, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*,[1] is based on the 1982 Gifford lectures, the prestigious Scottish lecture series that was endowed, more than a hundred years ago, by the will of Lord Gifford. Adam Gifford (1820-1887) prescribed in his will that the subject of the lectures should be natural theology, understood as containing within itself some account of the foundations of ethics. Gifford wanted his speakers to take up an empirical standpoint:

> I wish the lecturers to treat their subject as a strictly natural science . . . just [like] astronomy or chemistry.

Here readers might be inclined to jeer (or wistfully groan) "but that was another country, and besides, ethics is dead"; for after Gifford came Nietzsche, and Viennese positivism, and scientistic materialism, and Leninism, and Derrida, not to mention consumerism, and television, and Holy Market, and as a result there are many people walking up and down the world who refuse to allow any meaning at all, let alone any scientific meaning—whatever that is—to moral ideas. Iris Murdoch has already had a few things to say about those who walk up and down the world in this way, for example in *The Sovereignty of Good*, and also (more slyly) in some of her novels.

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals has been both praised and slated by reviewers in London's upmarket newspapers. In my opinion it has been misread by both kinds of critic. I think, too, that something can be learned from unpicking their misunderstandings. Some misreadings are the result of getting bogged down in the first chapter, which, as ill luck would have it, is one of the weakest in the book, but there are other more interesting reasons as well.

Simon Blackburn, writing in *The Times Literary Supplement*, condemns the book chiefly because it takes no notice of recent developments in moral philosophy. He is also cross because Dame Iris says that the five men who wrote the earliest descriptions of Jesus Christ were geniuses, because she does not attack the personality of Christ himself, and because she has a lot to say about the connections between religion and ethics. In short, he suspects her of being a crypto-Christian. In her defense I would argue as follows. First, if you think that the two-thousand-year-long preservation of the Gospels is *not* the result of divine dispensation, isn't it only reasonable to surmise that the writings themselves have some special human quality—such as genius, for example? Second, Iris Murdoch doesn't read much like a Christian. What is more, her discussion of theology is not confined to Christianity but delves into Zen, Sufism, and the religion, if it is a religion, of Jung. Third, the historical and psychological connections between

1 *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, by Iris Murdoch; Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 520 pages, $35.

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ethics and theology can scarcely be denied, yet at the same time it would be unwise to assume that ethics is even conceptually quite the same thing now as it was in an earlier, pre-Nietzschean, era. For a philosopher to be interested in the connections, the apparent disconnections, and the possible conceptual shifts, is surely no crime. Fourth, Adam Gifford decreed that the relationship between ethics and theology, whatever its character, is one of the things his lecturers are supposed to investigate. No doubt his wishes have often been ignored, but an honorable desire to adhere to the terms of his will is not to be despised.

Ray Monk, in a fulsome review for the liberal newspaper *The Independent*, praises Iris Murdoch precisely because she *does* ignore recent academic work in ethics. In this way he tries to enroll her as a fighter in his tedious battle against "Oxford analytic philosophy" and the sinister wiles of people like Professor Blackburn. Monk failed to notice that the book's dedication is to its author's distinguished (analytical, philosophical) Oxford contemporary Elizabeth Anscombe. Nor did he spot the fact that the Index lists several eminent "analytic" philosophers in addition to Heidegger, Derrida, *et al.* It is true that Dame Iris doesn't write like a professor, Oxford or other, for she is a novelist after all. It is also true that the "Oxford analytic philosophers" she does discuss are people of her own age. But so what? Monk's list of philosophers whom, according to him, she has pointedly ignored, are *his* teachers and *his* contemporaries. We are all inclined to concentrate attention on our own temporal milieux.

Iris Murdoch has never taken sides in the aforementioned battle. She is sympathetic to many different kinds of schools, and is herself, *qua* philosopher, a woman with a split personality. In one mood she likes to come down to earth, get down to detail, and engage with particularities, almost but not quite in the manner of an "Oxford analyst." When this happens much of what she says is astonishingly intelligent and original; she can give the reader a real jolt—rather like a jolt from Nietzsche, only more wordy. In another mood she prefers to draw comprehensive comparisons between very disparate writers and theories. When that happens she can be implausible, even cloudy. A third aspect appears when Dame Iris turns to discussions of mysticism. Mystics and mysticism bring out the worst in her.

Some schizophrenia is manifested in this book. Its quality is uneven, and it is not always easy to see what the work is supposed to be about. The difficulties have to do with genre as well. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* is discursive rather than dialectical (beautifully written of course: even her ways of making parentheses are worth trying to imitate), allusive, and strewn throughout with the names of the great thinkers of the past. There are many passages of extreme subtlety (and also some longueurs). Dozens of threads are drawn together (and some just left lying around). Any lessons to be learned will enter the minds of readers not as premises and inferences and logically drawn conclusions but more by a sort of osmosis. Now this kind of writing must be very difficult to handle. The genre encourages self-display, things can easily turn septic. How is one to carry one's learning lightly? How is one to pin things down? How answer questions as well as asking them? How stick to the point? What prophylactic is there against self-consciousness, and free association, and thinly disguised boastings about one's academic prowess, and huge library, and successful private life? How can one even be truthful? Well, Dame Iris manages to be quite truthful, and truthfulness is a prophylactic against many ills. And she isn't ever really self-conscious. She is sometimes pompous (a rare thing in a woman), but it is an un-self-conscious kind of pomposity, if that be not a contradiction in terms. On the other side it has to be said that she sometimes loses control of her material, a common lapse for those who choose the genre we are looking at. Some chapters are very good, others are confusing, hard to read, perhaps not altogether worth the effort.

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What is the book about? It is about lots of things (too many). Thus Chapter 1 is called "Unity and Art," Chapter 2 "Fact and Value"; Chapter 3 is (mostly) devoted to Schopenhauer, Chapter 4 to Art and Religion. Chapter 5, one of the best, is on the Comic and the Tragic, and here Iris Murdoch produces a new and iconoclastic answer to the ancient question, What is Tragedy? She claims that there are no tragedies, either in real life or in art, on the grounds that the concept is incoherent. Chapters 6, 8, and 9 have to do with philosophy of mind. Chapter 7 (another good one) discusses Derrida and deconstruction and politely dismantles both. Chapter 10 is called "Will and Duty," and Chapter 11 "Imagination." Chapter 12 is on Morals and Politics; it has almost no structure at all but is full of interesting insights about tyrants and tyranny. In Chapter 13, the ontological argument is expounded (to my mind) in a very careless fashion and some strange conclusions are drawn about its significance. Later sections are on Descartes, and Kant, and Buber, and God. Some titles are mysterious. For instance the final chapter is called "Metaphysics: A Summary," which suggests, well, a summary of metaphysics. In fact, the chapter consists of seven pages of mystical musings about the likes of Simone Weil and Paul Tillich. Has there been an editorial blunder, or is Dame Iris making a joke? There are some important ideas, though, within the welter. One is that access to metaphysics (roughly speaking, philosophy in general, including its history) gives a way (not the only way) of grasping the nature of ethics, the place of art in human life, and the past and present roles of religious belief and disbelief in moral thinking. How is this shown? Not so much by argument, although there is argument here too, but rather by displaying the connections between philosophical ideas and common experience on the one hand, and morality, art, and religion on the other. Iris Murdoch takes Wittgenstein's dictum "Don't think: look!" fairly seriously, also his (and Plato's) suggestion that a philosopher should in some sense remind us of what we already know. It could be argued that her quasi-empirical methods come closer to Adam Gifford's intentions than those of any of his other postwar lecturers.

Then is the work "Wittgensteinian" in character? I think not, on the whole. Wittgenstein says that philosophy "compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction," but his own travelings, though criss-cross, are at the same time intensely focused. He dwells on a smallish number of topics (chiefly mind and soul, mathematics, logic, and language), he has no apparent interest in the history of philosophy, and he almost never mentions other writers. Iris Murdoch's method is the same but different, she travels criss-cross indeed, but there are hundreds of questions, and her answers arise through an examination of the "huge jumbled history" of books and art and ideas.

Her most important conclusion, or implication, is that moral thinking cannot be removed from human life, cannot be reduced to something else, cannot be perceived as incidental, or left for "society" to decide about, or turned into "scientific consequentialism," or smashed by tyrants, or taken over by a Church, or destroyed by philosophical skepticism. But do not ask for a syllogism, because what is being given is a different kind of demonstration, and it is in this matter of demonstration, rather than in content or style or focus, that Murdoch somewhat resembles Wittgenstein. To some such question as: Can it be "logically proven" that other human beings feel pain? Wittgenstein's reply begins: Look at your attitude to the human being, or even to a wriggling fly. Look at your attitude to a stove or a stone. In answer to moral skepticism Iris Murdoch asserts that "levels and modes of understanding are also levels and modes of existence." The reality of different levels of understanding and existence is not proved *a priori* but displayed, the author is saying in effect "Don't think: look!", and she suggests many things to look at. Look at what you do when you tell the story of your day in the office. Look at your enjoyment of a sad or

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funny book. Look at what Kant says about duty, at what things make you feel guilty, at what Plato says about the Good. Consider your friendly or hostile reactions to the very idea of a religious sermon. Look at your reactions to pictures of the Crucifixion, to the story of Antigone, to a philosopher who says that morality is objective (or that it isn't), to pornography, to Shakespeare, to things read in newspapers, to television, to politics, to Freudianism, to pessimism, to descriptions of the Holocaust. Notice that tyrants hate jokes. Notice that jokes, like judgments about the good and the bad and the right and the wrong, are everywhere in human life. Notice that as well as egoism and selfishness "ordinary simple compassion exists all over the place."

This demonstration of the validity of moral thinking is partly empirical and partly transcendental. It is empirical insofar as it rests on evidence, evidence which shows that art works and value judgments make massive appearances in all human self-expression and in every day of human life. The demonstration is transcendental insofar as it implies that if morality, art, and religious feeling were not irreducible modes of existence they could not be irreducible levels of understanding, and if they were not irreducible levels of understanding the evidence would not be what it is.

Dangerous liaisons

Tony Judt Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956. University of California Press, 348 pages, $30

reviewed by David Gress

After reading Tony Judt's rich story of vicious folly and self-satisfied ignorance disguised as moral and political sophistication, the shell-shocked reader might be forgiven for supposing that the French have an unassailable monopoly on intellectual idiocy, beside which the antics of American multiculturalists and feminists pale in comparison. Such is not quite the case—Judt quotes Mary McCarthy writing in 1977 that she would happily "sacrifice the comforts" of her affluent life to the "excitement" of living under socialism—but, after reading *Past Imperfect*, the reader certainly has to conclude that few groups as privileged, as fortunate, and supposedly as critical and discriminating in their political and historical perceptions as the intellectuals of postwar France have ever more abjectly betrayed their calling, their intelligence, and the moral fate of their class and their country.

What is one to think, for example, of the powers of analysis or even the familiarity with daily newspapers of one who could write, in 1948, that "in Stalinism . . . the working class recognizes its own image, its work, the provisional repository of its sovereignty. You claim that this minority is harming the working class. But how could it? It draws its power from the proletariat"? The answer is, not much. Yet the author was no high-school sophomore trying to score a cheap debating trick, but Jean-Paul Sartre himself, the prince of Parisian intellectuals and, for the twelve years covered by Judt's book, the uncontested arbiter of political correctness.

Tony Judt is far too good a scholar to preach sermons or draw strained analogies, which only makes his book all the more powerful. It is a landmark example of a genre practiced by a great Frenchman, one who did not surrender to the totalitarian temptation and who plays a shadowy part as lonely critic in *Past Imperfect*: Raymond Aron. That genre is the political history of ideas, that is, the study, by example and analysis, of how, and why, general ideas are exploited, mobilized, and otherwise made use of in political debate and struggle. Judt knows his French history before, after, and behind the shrill arguments and posturings of the fairly brief period that is the focus of his story, and that is what permits him to offer what no one has done before, namely an explanation, as opposed to a mere account, of this great betrayal of in-

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tellect by the intellectuals. For the first time, the Communist epidemic that seized Paris from 1944 to 1956, with after- effects that lasted decades, is not merely chronicled—and entertainingly so—but explained.

That explanation involves a rather drastic twist to the usual plot of French and, indeed, European political and intellectual history, so I will save it to the end, as Judt does. He gives a first indication of where it lies when he says, in his introduction, that French philosophical tradition lacks "a concern with public ethics or political morality." This, surely, is a startling observation when we recall that moralism, whether misguided or not, was a hallmark of French intellectual rhetoric from Voltaire to Sartre and beyond. But it is precisely Judt's point that moralism is not at all the same thing as concern for political morality—indeed, moralism often characterizes a posture that is the very antithesis of any civilized morality. Were not Lenin and Hitler great moralists—the one on behalf of the Revolution, the other on behalf of the German nation?

Judt sets the scene by describing the situation at the moment of liberation from German occupation in 1944. In standard accounts of why French intellectuals embraced Communism, the emotions and compulsions of 1944, of the year of Liberation, play a large role. Judt points to four of these emotions in particular: despair, commitment, revenge, and desire for justice. Despair was the common feeling of most Frenchmen faced with the defeat of 1940. Aron himself, who never gave in to Communism, spoke of his "despair of French decline" in the 1930s. For Sartre, Paul Nizan, Emmanuel Mounier, Claude Bourdet, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the other philo-Communists, the despair turned to rage at the French bourgeoisie and the smug Republican middle class that had failed to stop the Germans and who now—in Sartre's view—intended to return to a comfortable, indolent life. What that life lacked was commitment—the commitment to a cause over the content of the cause. After the war, he realized that Communism could provide that content, thus giving commitment a purpose.

As for revenge and desire for justice, these emotions were aimed at the losers of 1944, the adherents of the Vichy regime and the collaborators. No matter that most Frenchmen were Vichy supporters in 1940 and until the very eve of Liberation. No matter that many were as honorable and sincere in their individual morality as many members of the Resistance—in 1944, after Liberation, all were tarred with the brush of Fascism. The French purge of genuine or alleged collaborators was the most brutal and the most arbitrary in Western Europe.

It would, of course, have been logically conceivable for Sartre, Mounier, and the others to have drawn the same conclusion from their experience of defeat and occupation as the intellectuals of postwar Germany did—namely, to support liberal democracy and its institutions as the best guarantee of individual freedoms, social balance, and material prosperity. The real strangeness of the French case—and it only appears in its full strangeness when compared with the rest of Western Europe—is that this alternative seemed quite simply unthinkable, except for Raymond Aron, who, as Judt rightly points out, was the exception that proved the rule. Instead of liberal democracy, Communism. Instead of the individual, mankind. Instead of Western democracy, Eastern totalitarianism.

Not that many intellectuals actually joined the Communist Party. There were some, but their pathetic contortions are of no deeper significance than those of their comrades elsewhere in the world. Rather, the peculiar character of the French intellectual climate was defined by those who, like Sartre and Mounier, felt an irresistible, almost neurotic, compulsion not just to accept Stalinism but to explain it—to explain why it was right, just, and in the logic of History. This compulsion, Judt accurately notes, was not the result of a rational conviction that Marxism was true, or even that one must make generous allowances for a Soviet Union recently invaded by Germany and now at-

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tacked ceaselessly on all fronts by American imperialism. Such a posture was common enough on the left elsewhere in Europe or in the U.S. Again, the French intellectuals exaggerated into a compulsive faith what elsewhere was often not more than a quirk of character. In Judt's words:

> At the center lay the will and the desire to believe in communism. Around this article of faith were wrapped various layers of argument deriving from specific communist achievements in the recent past. In the next orbit was to be found a certain style of reasoning, a sort of epistemological double vision, which made it possible to explain Soviet behavior in terms not invoked for any other system or persons. . . . The next layer [was] a long-standing habit of mind, hostile to various manifestations of modernity and individualism, which is sometimes referred to . . . as "anti-Americanism."

Whereas Communist Party intellectuals had merely to follow the line laid down by Moscow, Sartre and his followers had to find reasons to justify Soviet actions. Three categories of such actions were especially troublesome: the show trials in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, many of whose victims were yesterday's Communist leaders; Soviet aggression in general; and the domestic oppression in the USSR, symbolized by the Soviet concentration camp system.

In retrospect, the explanations seem rather pitiful. Essentially, they boiled down to asserting either that the actions in question were not really occurring, or that they were justified by the need to defend the Soviet Union, or Communism, or world progress toward socialism. As Judt puts it in discussing Jean Beaufret, one of Sartre's more slavish followers: "He and his contemporaries had indeed constructed a 'phenomenology of the Soviet Revolution,' but it rested on an unusual premise: that of the self-annihilation of the observer. . . . The evidence, of camps, deportations, trials, and the like, had to be set aside, or placed in a sort of ethical parenthesis."

This "ethical parenthesis," this refusal to entertain normal political emotions, was indeed the fundamental distinguishing characteristic of Sartre's generation in Paris. No one held a gun to their heads, no one forced them to say or write what they did. The compulsion was internal.

What then, caused it? This is the point at which the conventional narratives fall short. Beginning in 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev in his Secret Speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party denounced Stalin as a traitor to socialism, those French intellectuals who were not themselves Communists gradually distanced themselves from the USSR. They refused, however, to recant their earlier opinions and remained defiantly hostile to Western democratic practices and institutions. Only in the late 1970s did some of them start to write memoirs in which they acknowledged that their earlier faith in Communism had been misplaced, that they had, in fact, been wrong in seeing the Soviet Union as the vanguard of liberation and genuine democracy. A symptomatic example of this literature was the aptly titled *J'ai cru au matin* (*I Believed in the Morning*) by Pierre Daix. But even these late recantations were curiously incomplete. The author, typically, would denounce his own youthful folly and, in particular, would denounce the Communist Party for deceiving him, but rarely, if ever, would he ask why he was so easily deceived and what kept him from seeing the obvious truths about Communism and about the Soviet Union for so long.

Starting in the late 1970s, a new generation of French intellectuals denounced the philo-Communism of the postwar generation and, with it, the entire tradition of French Marxism. These denunciations were often entertaining and certainly salutary, but, again, they missed something important. As Judt points out, their authors were French and so shared the same tendency toward shrill moralism and rhetorical character assassination that they were eager to attack in Sartre and his allies.

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The real explanation for what happened, and the reason that we ought to bother with this painful past today, Judt argues, is that the postwar episode illustrated a fundamental failing in French political culture, one that is not yet cured. That failing was a distrust, bordering on contempt, for liberalism and liberal democracy. Judt is here using "liberal" in its continental European, not its American, sense, and specifically in the sense defined by Isaiah Berlin when he spoke of "negative liberty" as the liberty of individuals *against* the community, as a set of "rights inhering in persons not because they have a certain place in society, nor because society has accorded them these rights by virtue of their membership of the citizenry, but just because they are autonomous human beings."

I called this explanation a twist in the standard plot of French and European history because if France and French political thought are associated with anything at all, it is with the ringing declarations of freedom and of the rights of man proclaimed in 1789. How could it be that the same culture that virtually invented modern democratic freedom as idea and as practice gave birth to the contempt and lack of sympathy for individual freedom and rights so prevalent among the postwar intellectuals?

The reader of Tocqueville may have sensed here what is coming, and, indeed, Judt's explanation is profoundly Tocquevillian. The French Revolution proclaimed rights and freedoms, and believed in both, but the revolutionaries found themselves almost immediately engaged in building up a new sovereign power, the national republic. "The very rights of the people that gave the revolutionary governments their legitimacy also gave them the authority to restrict the practice of rights and liberties by that same people." Thus, the rights of citizens became the duties of citizens to support and defend the republic. By the mid-twentieth century, this Jacobin language of citizenship, duty, and obligation was completely ingrained in French political culture, to such a degree that anyone advocating individual liberal rights in the British or American manner would immediately appear to be out for some special and suspect advantage.

Ironically, for all their vaunted critical capacities, the Sartres and Mouniers never realized how their very thoughts and rhetorical styles were crippled by the Jacobin inheritance. "The French radical tradition," Judt concludes, "was dominated by a combination of republican premises and Marxist projections, conflating the capacities of the state and the interests of the individual. Quite absent was the liberal assumption of a necessary and desirable space between the two, between the individual and the collective. . . . In these circumstances the unconcern for rights made perfect sense—rights being precisely those concepts that persons in society claim in their protection, to fill the gap between the desirable and the real in public affairs."

The centralized state and educational system of the nineteenth and twentieth century guaranteed the survival of this Jacobin-republican ideology. Nor is it yet dead. Since the mid-1980s, many French intellectuals have proclaimed an end to the diseases of the past, in particular to the kind of philo-totalitarianism and betrayal of reason of the Sartre generation. They call themselves liberals and declare that France has, at last, rejoined the mainstream of European political culture, in which liberal institutions are the norm and totalitarian temptations the exception. Too soon to tell, says Judt: the new liberalism in Paris looks suspiciously like the old Jacobin republicanism with a human face. The real liberals remain few and far between.

Thus we see, at last, that *Past Imperfect* is not just a pun, but a double pun. First, the past of 1944-56 was not merely imperfect, but a disgrace to a culture that prides itself on reason and tolerance. Second, those who today recollect and condemn that past are doing so imperfectly so long as they still fail to understand why Communism took such a hold in postwar France—not because the intellectuals loved Stalin but because they

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could not tolerate, and did not understand, liberal democracy. This past is indeed *imparfait* in the French grammatical sense—it is a continuing past that remains with us.

He said, she said

Stephen Donadio, Joan Smith, Susan Mesner & Rebecca Davison, editors
The New York Public Library Book of 20th-Century American Quotations. Warner Books, 622 pages, $24.95

Angela Partington, editor
The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations. 4th Edition. Oxford University Press, 1,061 pages, $35

reviewed by John Simon

Election is democratic, selection is aristocratic—or, if you prefer, elitist. Thus a dictionary of quotations is, by definition, elitist. The sayings and writings chosen for it represent ideas better thought out and more smartly put than the average person could manage. Perhaps that is why the editors of such books so strenuously affirm their democracy.

In *The New York Public Library Book of 20th-Century American Quotations* (one of the unwieldiest titles to come down the pike, but note that user-friendly "Book," rather than dictionary), the editors—Stephen Donadio, Joan Smith, Susan Mesner, and Rebecca Davison—affirm: "We searched beyond the notable to find lesser known contributions. It was especially satisfying to find people who were well known within their communities but who have not been visible to the larger society." If you wonder why there is no hyphen in "well-known," you get your answer on page 288, from John Benbow (*Manuscript and Proof*, 1937): "If you take hyphens seriously you will surely go mad." The absence of a comma after "seriously" suggests that taking commas seriously may be equally perilous. And when, a bit further on, we read, "If there seem [*sic*] to be a shortage of minority and women's voices . . ." we conclude that dwelling overmuch on questions of number may also be injurious to mental health.

Similarly, Angela Partington, the editor in chief of *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Fourth Edition, hastens to announce: "Some may throw up their hands in disbelief, but popular songs assuredly will feature in the verse anthologies of tomorrow, and a dictionary of this kind, which essentially is a mirror of the age, must acknowledge merit in whatever form it takes." Some may throw up more than their hands when they read that music is the thing for which these songs "are best remembered, but for which they should not only be remembered." Not *only* remembered? Also enshrined, pedestalized, embalmed? Oh, what a misplaced "only" can do!

A dictionary of quotations, however, is not necessarily what its editors want it to be—Miss Partington, for instance, would exclude mere aphorisms and include more about environmental protection, as if anthology followed ecology; it is, rather, what it turns out to be. And the big difference between these two "quote books" (to use the demotic term)—bigger than that one is merely twentieth-century American—is that one is arranged according to topics, and the other alphabetically, by authors.

It strikes me that the former procedure is basically democratic; the latter, aristocratic. For the emphasis in the *Public Library Book* (hereinafter PLB) is democratically on issues, not on celebrated individuals: people care about topics such as "Business," "Government and Politics," and "Relationships"; they don't much care about who exactly said what. Whereas the more aristocratic clientele of *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (hereinafter ODQ) would be concerned in part with who the author is. If Shakespeare, Milton, or C. S. Lewis said it, one snaps to attention; if Georges Simenon, Stanley Kubrick, or Beatrice Lillie, one is merely amused. Some quotations are meant to make us feel members of the upper crust; others, that we are pleasurably slumming. A quota-

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tion, like a suit or a dress, is not just what it is; it is also the magic of the author's or designer's signature.

But, of course, everything depends on what a quote book is for. We are clear about what a lexicon or dictionary does, but the uses of a quote book are not so perspicuous. It is, first, a tool for identifying quotations that the quoter thought too well-known to require attribution. In that case, the quote book must be sure to include the famous quotations, for they are the ones most likely to be served up without the author's name. This, then, is the quote book as filler in of gaps in our erudition. Or it may be we who wish to quote something, say that bit about the pelican—you know, the one about his . . . ah, well, we'll look it up. The quote book, then, as guide to the after-dinner speaker and cocktail-party wit.

Or we may be curious about what sayings of our most loved or hated authors are headed for immortality. Or, indeed, curious about the number of quotations with which a notable weighs in. So X gets eight, whereas Y rates only five? The quote book as cultural racing form or critical tipster. For all of these purposes ODQ is better than PLB, especially since it provides 17,500 quotations from 2,500 authors as against the latter's 8,000 from 2,000 authors. But what if your purpose is just to be entertained and, in the process, discover new books and authors to seek out on the basis of these savory samples—the quote book as a liberal education, evening courses for adults? For this, both dictionaries may be equally useful, PLB marginally more so if you are partial to modern American culture, or simply trying to reassure yourself that it exists.

Again, if you are going to address a special group, say, teachers or chefs and restaurateurs, PLB with its rubrics "Education" and "Food" will be more helpful. But then I begin to worry about those quotations from people well-known within their own communities but unknown at large. I am sure that the postmaster of Council Bluffs, Iowa, is a hell of a wit and raconteur, whose winged words are the savories of his community, but do I want to sacrifice to him space better reserved for such more chicly quotable notables as Thorstein Veblen and Reinhold Niebuhr? It comes down, I guess, to whether you prefer postmasters or pastmasters.

Yet there are still other uses for quote books. You may, for example, be a weekly columnist in search of a clever title for your column. This week it is all about sex, and you need a catchy, sexy head. ODQ will give you thirty entries under "Sex." PLB's section "Relationships" has a whole subsection "Sex" comprising, granted, only twenty-seven entries. But just before it come subsections on "Marriage, Divorce, and Other Arrangements" and "Romance," which can be drawn on; and just after it comes the section "Religion and Spirituality" with its hefty subsection "Sin." These, taken together, as they should be, far outstrip ODQ.

A further application for quote books is in solving crossword puzzles, double crostics, and the like, where, however, ODQ, with its ecumenism and greater girth, proves more useful. Still, I suspect that the most valuable service a quote book provides is the sheer pleasure it offers the disinterested browser. How nice to leaf through the pages of PLB and discover this from Louis Kahn: "Consider . . . the momentous event in architecture when the wall parted and the column became." It's enough to start you off on all sorts of architectural and historic daydreams; and if, on top of that, you are a *poeta doctus* such as John Ashbery or John Hollander, there is bound to be a poem in it for you. Or you may come across this in ODQ: "The pellet with the poison's in the vessel with the pestle. The chalice from the palace has the brew that is true." It is from Norman Panama and Melvin Frank's movie *The Court Jester*, and was spoken by Danny Kaye. You may now rush to your neighborhood video store and rent the film—a cultural chain reaction.

Again, suppose you are a professional puzzle-maker—I am sure there are such persons, though the trade is as precarious as gathering samphire. (You don't know what I am alluding to? Turn to page 597 of ODQ and

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you have your answer.) So: you are a professional puzzle-maker and you come across this from Erica Jong in PLB: "Bigamy is having one husband too many. Monogamy is the same." Pronto, you have your new puzzle: "Name a situation where one plus two is the same as one plus one." Answer: Marriage. Yet even if you aren't a puzzle-maker, only a spouse, wouldn't Erica's sally coax a smile from your soul?

And then there are those pure lagniappes as the one I got from ODQ only this week. I was reading Miss Partington's preface and there was this piece of wisdom: "When we discover just how old a quotation is ('Man is by nature a political animal') we marvel that it was not written yesterday, and when we discover just how new it is ('Damaged people are dangerous; they know they can survive') we wonder that it was not always with us." Well, I had no difficulty identifying the source of that "political animal"; but whence that fascinating aperçu about damaged people? I looked it up and found it was from Josephine Hart's best seller *Damage*. The next day, I had to catch a film preview for my upcoming movie column, and the movie was . . . *Damage*. Sure enough, there was the great line—the equal of Aristotle, as Miss P. told me—smack in the middle of it. The movie was garbage (as I dare say the novel must be, too), but that line gave me food for thought about garlicky sapphires embedded in the mud of modern commercial fiction: without ODQ, PLB, or the odd movie adaptation, they would never reach the likes of you and me.

All quote books are good up to a point; all of them supply some gems. From ODQ you get fancier ones, by and large. After all, its dust jacket is a reproduction of *Love and the Maiden*, a painting by an obscure Pre-Raphaelite, John Roddam Spencer-Stanhope. Heaven knows what it has to do with a dictionary of quotations, but it looks very tony. Contrariwise, PLB's dust jacket displays caricatures of some of the people quoted: Isaac Asimov, Mae West, Martin Luther King, Jr., Tom Wolfe, Jackie Kennedy, so you know you are getting some home truths from genuine folk heroes and heroines. There are more banalities in PLB (such as Molly Haskell's "The propaganda arm of the American Dream Machine, Hollywood"), but there, too, you'll find such solid Americana as any number of funny sayings from Elbert Hubbard, whom until now I tended to confuse with the Scientologist L. Ron Hubbard, who was no laughing matter. ODQ has classier trivia, such as this from James Payn (English writer, 1830-1898): "I had never had a piece of toast/ Particularly long and wide,/ But fell upon the sanded floor,/ And always on the buttered side."

Which of the two books should you buy? If at all possible, both. Consider, it is in ODQ, not in PLB, that you get the Scientologist Hubbard's shockingly true "If you really want to make a million . . . the quickest way is to start your own religion." And it is in PLB, not in ODQ, that you get Theodore Roosevelt's "Every immigrant who comes here should be required within five years to learn English or leave the country." Yes, and let's extend that rule to the natives as well.

Anti-familiar essays

Ellen Willis No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays. Wesleyan/ University Press of New England, 298 pages, $22.95

reviewed by Heather Mac Donald

In her second collection of writings, *No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays*, Ellen Willis announces a new plague: rampant "familialism." The family, she warns, "endangers our lives." It is not the break-up of the family that lies behind America's disintegrating social compact but rather the family itself. Willis, a former senior editor and columnist of the *Village Voice* and now associate professor of journalism at New York University, triumphantly declares the family "a dying beast." She finds evidence that we remain "a dogmatically familialist culture,"

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however, in such phenomena as "violence," "millions of poor children," "pornography," the "oppression of women and children," "sexual and emotional repression," fear of pleasure, and gender differentiation. In a flight of inspired logic, she even attributes the emotional difficulties of the children of divorce to—you guessed it—the family, not to its dismantling.

Willis's book appears in the middle of a small boom of scholarly works dedicated to dispelling the "myth" of family values.[1] Revisionist historians are busily trying to show that the nuclear family never existed, or if it did, that it was never the seed-bed of positive social values that its elegists now proclaim. Whereas these family revisionists are driven by political correctness—since inner-city blacks are experiencing the worst crisis in the family and the worst consequences thereof, it becomes imperative to deny that families are a positive value—Willis's opposition to the family comes out of the anti-authoritarianism of the Sixties. If you yearn to relive that era's inanities, *No More Nice Girls* is the book for you. It is chock-full of such howlers as: The acid-induced "vision [of] people . . . turn[ing] into elegant giraffes and scared birds and angry terriers . . . [was] real—or as real as anything else [and] suggested what human beings might be if we grew up differently, if certain kinds of damage [presumably chromosomal] were not inflicted." The dust jacket describes *No More Nice Girls* as "grappl[ing] with the challenge of sustaining a radical vision in a conservative era." This almost gets it right. More accurately, Willis's challenge is how to sustain a radical vision that has been proven thoroughly bankrupt.

The essentials of that vision are an unqualified rejection of authority, the equation of freedom with individual license, automatic blaming of "the system" for any impediments to immediate gratification, and a determination to submit the variety of personal experience to the vise of a global "theory." Willis has updated her Sixties persona only as necessary to take into account contemporary identity politics. The result is a rather indigestible mix of countercultural bromides and the grimmer litany of "race-genderclass."

By definition, the family is anathema to a "radical vision." It is hierarchical—ideally, a source of order and discipline as well as of love and nurturing. It is the site where a society's norms are transmitted. And it represents long-term emotional and legal commitment, rather than the vagaries of "free love." To this roster of offenses, Willis adds a few of her own: The family is our culture's main obstacle to ecstasy and pleasure. It breeds not only sexual repression but also sexism. It imposes "gender distinctions" on children and fosters a terrified adherence to the sexual status quo. The family accomplishes its vast repressive mission quite economically, with one simple tool: the female castration complex.

Willis's Reichian-inspired explication of the female castration complex is the dramatic highlight of the book. It is a tale of such sordid passion and violence that it is a miracle children ever survive to the age of puberty. The castration complex also lies at the very heart of her feminism, constituting her major disagreement with both mainstream and "radical" feminism. Her unquestioning commitment to so fantastical a theory places an immense strain on whatever credibility she might otherwise possess.

According to Willis, children subjected to patriarchal culture "develop a quite literal belief in the reality or threat of an attack on their genitals." After observing the inequality between the sexes and having had their own sexual desires thwarted by their parents, they "conclude . . . entirely reasonabl[y]" that girls have been castrated for their bad sexual

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1 See, e.g., Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (Basic Books, 1992); Arlene S. Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise: The American Family in an Age of Uncertainty* (Basic Books, 1991); Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives:The Politics and History of Family Violence* (Viking, 1988); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Period* (Basic Books, 1988).

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desires. Specifically, the girl "believe[s] that her mother [castrated her] to keep her from inciting her father to rape and murder."

The "castration trauma" is not a misunderstanding at which children arrive on their own, but is deliberately staged by conspiring parents. It is "the pivotal event of an ongoing process . . . in which parents prepare their children to 'freely' embrace a masculine or feminine identity." Willis holds parents equally responsible for the Oedipal triangle, which she says they "instigate [by] encouraging the other-sex child's fantasies with their . . . predatory . . . seductiveness . . . and [by] provoking or exacerbating same-sex rivalry with their own hostile, competitive behavior."

Willis attributes to young children not only an astoundingly precocious sexuality, but in the case of girls, a feminist consciousness strikingly reminiscent of her own. Young girls would be the newest recruits for the revolution if the patriarchal family didn't get to them first. A girl's "most subversive wish [is] to reject her female destiny." Yet "[e]ventually the bad news [of her castration] sinks in, and becomes a traumatic blow to the child's lingering hopes of beating the system. In accepting the awful truth, the child undergoes a kind of conversion to the parent's sexual values."

This lurid saga of lust and vengeance in the nursery immediately raises two questions: when, and says who? Willis's account unfolds in a temporal vacuum. One sifts through pages of gory details without finding a reference to the age of the victims. Such a detail would provide a sorely needed touch of verisimilitude to an otherwise wholly imaginary tale. Far more desperately needed, however, are some first person accounts of the atrocities. Given how widespread the phenomenon is alleged to be, testimony should have poured in from all over. Willis herself has a young daughter; her explanation of where her penis went would have been particularly welcome. But the closest thing we get to empirical confirmation is Willis's revelation that her "ideas about sexual character formation have been strongly influenced by insights from [her] own psychotherapy." To which the reader can only respond: we suspected as much all along.

Projecting penis envy onto young children, with all the squalid Oedipal intriguing that the complex entails, is the theoretical equivalent of the demand by New York City's Board of Education that first graders (or as a fall back position, fifth or sixth graders) be taught to "respect gay people." In both cases, children are being stripped of their innocence and abruptly pushed into the adult world of sexuality in order to serve as pawns for someone's political agenda.

Willis is rather hazy on alternatives to the repression-inducing family. She decries the "equation of biological and social parenthood," and declares that "children should be members of the community, not wards of their parents," so presumably she favors communal child-rearing. It is amusing to contemplate how long Willis would last in a functional commune; her penchant for gender ambiguity and the "pursuit of ecstasy" might not be highly appreciated in a social system that subsumes individual desire and autonomy to the needs of the collectivity. Indeed, Willis criticizes Elizabeth Fox-Genovese for invoking the "common good," a concept which Willis links to "the repressive patriarchal norms of Judeo-Christian morality . . . or [to] some form of authoritarian collectivism." Yet she simultaneously debunks "liberal individualism in capitalist societies" as "masking . . . systemic domination." So it would seem that "bourgeois individualism" should be destroyed, just as long as it's not *my* rights you're taking away.

Willis is not, in fact, raising her own child communally, but is conducting an experiment of even greater significance for our post-modern age: ironic parenting. She and the girl's father remained unmarried to register their "rejection of a patriarchal contract," but nevertheless found themselves "plunged into the pit of urban middle-class Nuclear Familydom." In response, they are "attempt[ing] to maintain an ironic . . .

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detachment from [their] situation, to think of Nuclear Familydom as an educational experience, an ordeal, like Outward Bound."

We are not, unfortunately, granted their daughter's response to such parental enthusiasm; it seems safe to predict, however, that ironic parenting will prove a boon for the next generation of psychotherapists.

Being an ironic parent does not mean, however, that one ceases being a radical parent. When Willis experiences any conflicts in the course of child-rearing, she never forgets whom to blame. She attributes her struggles with her daughter over the child's incessant demands for sweets to the dilemma of being a "parent . . . in an age of scarcity and constraint, in the grip of family life, which is structured to insure that no one gets enough time, patience, acceptance, babying and reassurance, or freedom and power." The reader is left to puzzle out for herself whether the overthrow of "the system" will mean the disappearance of the sweet tooth or the possibility of indulging it without consequence.

For Willis, penis envy unlocks the central conundrum of female psychology and explains why feminism has failed to pursue its true mission. Willis is immensely perplexed by women's preference for monogamy and marriage over "free love." Likewise, in the early days of the radical feminist movement, "there were a lot of arguments about how to interpret [women's preference for monogamy]: did it represent these women's true desires, their objective interest given a sexist culture, or the psychology of the oppressed?"

Willis answers that voluntary monogamy represents the final triumph of the castration drama. Girls' "unconscious feelings of irrevocable violation, shame, global terror and dangerous rage" accompany them into adult life and force them to repress "their lustful feelings." The preference for monogamy is a sign, therefore, of an unhealthy psyche: "[W]hat looks like women's superior ability to integrate sex and love is only a more hidden form of alienation."

The women's movement, including Willis's natural allies—the radical feminists—has adopted its own defensive strategy against the "wound of female otherness," by ignoring Freud and Reich. (Whatever else one may think of radical feminism, one must at least gratefully acknowledge this lapse.) Feminism's reluctance to "analyse women's behavior psychoanalytically" is responsible for what Willis views as its fatally misplaced priorities. It has made sexual coercion and violence its main concern, rather than sexual liberation. In case you thought we were already a sexually liberated culture, ponder this: "[C]hildren have no recognized sexual rights at all, and adolescents virtually none." Willis dismisses the argument that stressing sexual license in the age of AIDS is irresponsible: it is repression that is irresponsible because it leads to "sexual and social irresponsibility and violence."

Not surprisingly, the sexual state of grace that Willis would have us seek is to be found in the Sixties. She laments the passing of "the dream, at its most apocalyptic, of universal love: it was one thing to have sex with strangers, quite another if the strangers were your brothers and sisters, if you need not fear games, or contempt, or violence." If the idea of sex with one's brothers and sisters sounds less than aphrodisiac, there is always sex with one's neighbors. As part of her lifelong struggle against "coupledom," Willis once persuaded her boyfriend and a married couple (with baby) with whom they were sharing a house to "extend sexual intimacy beyond the sacred dyad":

> It turned out that while the husband and I were pursuing an enjoyable experiment, expanding our friendship, transcending the nuclear family, and so on, our mates were doing something rather different—were infatuated with each other, in fact.

The married couple subsequently divorced.

Willis might possess the unenviable capacity of treating sex like a game of bridge, but it is not clear why separating sex from its emotional impact is the surest route to "ecstasy." For those still susceptible to the psychological wallop of physical intimacy,

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the sexual license that Willis advocates can only lead to emotional chaos.

In the epilogue, Willis poses what is undoubtedly intended to be a dagger-sharp question: "*Pleasure*. Does it sound like a dirty word to you?" It is unfortunate that she doesn't ask the question in the introduction, so that anyone who answers, "No, just not part of a political program," could check out early. In combining a hedonistic demand of "freedom" for the self with a political-theoretical straitjacket for everyone else, Willis's book exemplifies the two faces of contemporary American radicalism. The shallowness of Willis's concept of freedom is embodied in the fact that for her, psychedelics are one of its most "potent emblem[s]." Only an American, sated on true political freedom, could equate the retreat into the solipsistic, private space of hallucination, from which participation in the public realm of shared perception and understanding is all but impossible, with politically significant "freedom."

Yet when it comes to anyone else's private realm, the countercultural radical denies that it exists. Willis reaffirms her commitment to the recognition that the personal is political. Revealing a breathtaking parochialism, she declares that the women's movement will be able "to organize effectively against the right" only to the extent it develops "a political theory of sexuality." Leaving aside the absurdity of the notion that American women are clamoring for a "sexual politics that has pleasure as its goal," Willis's campaign for "ecstasy" and her zeal for theory are at cross-purposes. The insistent awareness that one is involved in "political praxis" hardly seems a recipe for abandonment in the bedroom.

The balance between the Left's demands for individual pleasure and its global theorizing has altered since the Sixties. In multiculturalism and identity politics, the dour roll call of oppressor and oppressed has almost drowned out the call for personal gratification. The demand for pleasure now metamorphoses into the wild charge that the official culture is somehow responsible for the impediments to erotic satisfaction posed by AIDS.

Willis's mission is to retip that balance back toward a politics of pleasure. Jettisoning the family is the number one priority in what she calls her "admittedly risky, admittedly arrogant project of reimagining the world." She is skeptical of success, however, because she admits with great bitterness that we now live in "an era when the utopian imagination has failed." May it enjoy a very long rest.

Scrappy days

H. L. Mencken
My Life as Author & Editor.
Edited & with an Introduction
by Jonathan Yardley.
Knopf, 480 pages, $30

reviewed by Thomas Mallon

He was a literary machine, self-designed and chiefly for killing. Shortly after the century turned, H. L. Mencken says he was "full of lust to function, and before I was twenty-five it was already plain that my functioning would take the form of a sharp and more or less truculent dissent from the *mores* of my country." His literary autobiography, published now for the first time, amounts to about 40 percent of an enormous manuscript Mencken dictated between 1942 and 1948, when he suffered a stroke. It covers the years before 1924 and *The American Mercury*, the period when he was editing *The Smart Set* with George Jean Nathan and having a personal success with *A Book of Prefaces* and *The American Language*. Perhaps most memorably, it is the record of a killer's progress, a body count conducted with Whistlerian relish ("In March, 1909, I made another violent enemy"), even as it insists its author "was far more eager to discover and proclaim merit."

All the susceptibilities of booboisie and intelligentsia are once more on display here. A reader watches, nostalgically, as Mencken shoots them down again, like carnival ducks.

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He refights Mencken's wars against "comstockery" and the "Anglomaniacs," laps up his contempt for anyone caught mucking about in "the swamps of the uplift," and appreciates his still-amusing contempt for the literary seacoast of Bohemia: "*Ulysses* seemed to be deliberately mystifying and mainly puerile, and I have never been able to get over a suspicion that Joyce concocted it as a kind of vengeful hoax. Writing excellent stuff in conventional patterns, he got very little attention and was so hard up that he had to go on teaching languages to keep alive, but from the moment he took to the literary bizarreries of Greenwich Village and began to push them further than Greenwich Village (or even the Left Bank) had ever dared, he was a made man." There are the incidental bashings, too ("New Orleans and Providence, both intellectual slums"), compulsive animadversions from a man who says, correctly, that "moral indignation . . . was foreign to [his] nature."

My Life as Author and Editor stands, for better and worse, as a matchless guide to American literary life in the years just before and after World War I. Mencken does superb work introducing readers to such forgotten writers and literary personalities as the short-story writer Lilith Benda and the poet (later publisher) John Farrar: "He was slim and graceful and had the peaches-and-cream complexion of a young girl not yet condemned to night work. As a result, he became at once the darling of all the fat women who like to rub noses with authors, and in a little while he was touring the country haranguing the women's clubs and driving the old girls crazy. Of that dismal trade there was never any more successful practitioner, at least in my time." Benda's and Farrar's names are comparatively enduring; Mencken lists fourteen others that he finds "over and over again in the disintegrating files of the *Smart Set*" without being able to remember "anything about them."

This says a mouthful about obscurity, and certainly nothing against Mencken's powers of recall, which are so formidably specific that the very elements making this a peerless record of his trade and era produce—even after Jonathan Yardley's yeoman slashing of the manuscript—some awfully dull reading. Much less about advertising lineage, sales figures, and the number of incoming manuscripts would still have gone a long way. Even the more inherently interesting tales of business rivalry and shifting ownership sometimes make a reader feel as if he's been locked in a library seventy years from now and condemned to read page 3 of every issue of *The New York Observer*: when Hastings Harcourt "was introduced into the business and began to take a more and more active hand in it, the father's partner, Brace (Howe had meanwhile retired), and the principal employees were full of disquiet."

But the book never takes long in coming back to life with amusing lines ("Claire [Burke] added the detail that [Willard H. Wright's] addiction had made him impotent, and thereby caused a rift in the lute of their domestic felicity"); blunt truths ("I was sincerely sorry for [Dreiser's wife], for in a competition with more charming and civilized women she was plainly at a great disadvantage"); and small cruelties ("The notice of his death in *Variety*, the movie organ, ran to but eighteen lines").

The portraits Mencken offers of still-read writers are the portions of the book exhibiting true shapeliness and polish, because with them he's willing to get ahead of himself, to jump into the future to finish them off. He shows the naïve, awkward Theodore Dreiser lurching from one publisher and woman to another, hurt that Mencken's admiration for his work does not extend to personal approval: "he was . . . upset by my skeptical attitude toward his removal to Greenwich Village and his arty life there with [the actress] Kirah Markham. While he lived uptown with [his wife] Sarah he led a thoroughly bourgeois life." Dreiser must have realized at some point that Mencken's championship of his books was as much a matter of personal ambition as it was disinterested homage. Around 1909, Mencken says, he needed "an author who was completely American in his

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themes and his point of view, who dealt with people and situations of wide and durable interest, who had something to say about his characters that was not too obvious, who was nevertheless simple enough to be understood by the vulgar, and who knew how to concoct and tell an engrossing story." *Jennie Gerhardt* came along two years later.

Mencken takes up F. Scott Fitzgerald at the outset of his alcoholic train wreck ("so shy a young fellow by nature, that he not only mistered Nathan and me, but also sirred us"), and makes every stop along Sinclair Lewis's downhill slide, saving his best shots for Lewis's second wife, Dorothy Thompson, "the true daughter of her Methodist pa —a tin pot messiah with an inflamed egoism that was wholly unameliorated by humor. Her eight years abroad as the correspondent for a third-rate newspaper had filled her with the conviction that she knew all that was worth knowing about the political, social and economic problems of the world, and her views, stated freely, had all the confidence of divine revelation."

A letter Mencken wrote to Ezra Pound in November 1936—"You made your great mistake when you abandoned the poetry business, and set up shop as a wizard in general practice"—makes one realize that Mencken traveled something of the same route himself (he was writing triolets in 1900) with greater cunning and lifetime success. Each one's anti-Semitism, however, came from a different mental precinct. Pound's was a predictable ingredient in the simmering crackpot of his "system." Mencken's, as this book amply shows, was something else—an almost physical compulsion, a sort of Tourette utterance, a discharge of poison he seemed doomed to vent at regular intervals while the proud machine of his judgments kept chugging on and laying down the law. This was no incidental flaw, no posthumous discovery limited to his private diaries (he was called on the matter as early as 1930), and not something that can be explained away by making allowance for the era and circumstances in which he lived. "Jew-like"; "a Jewish law firm called Fishbein, Goldfarb, Spritzwasser and Fishbein, or something of the sort"; "prehensile kikes" —and on and on. These are less the genteel barbarities of another age than the eternal chant of the crazy who's just boarded the subway car.

One would be hard put to find any book more indicative of this particular hatred's being, literally, a mental illness, one that in Mencken's case led to breathtaking abandonments of logic. In a single paragraph of his admiring treatment of his publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, Mencken says, first: "I had little if any prejudice against Jews myself." Six lines later we are told that Knopf "showed a certain amount of the obnoxious tactlessness of his race." Twenty pages later, in a discussion of the actor-producer Edgar Selwyn, cause precedes effect: "There was but little suggestion of the Jewish in his appearance and manner, and I got on with him very well." Finally, three pages before the book breaks off, this risible imparting of information: "Isaac Goldberg, like De Casseres, was a Jew . . ."

Mr. Yardley seems to have thought about this issue honestly and long, reaching the following conclusion: "if by the standards of our day Mencken was anti-Semitic, by those of his own he was not. Inasmuch as he lived in his time and not in ours, it is by this we should judge and, I believe, acquit him." But Mr. Yardley acknowledges the existence of "legitimate objections" to this view, and one must raise strong ones here. Mencken's anti-Semitism, by any definition, and in any time or place, was *spectacular*—gaudy, energetic, and marked by, to use a Mencken term, "salacity." His editor's excuses are overly sophisticated, even as they're offered with a certain embarrassment: "there is the old some-of-his-best-friends argument, which in Mencken's case carries considerable force." To Yardley's credit, he has presented this uncivilized material in a civilized way, taking care "not to excise any material that might be unfavorable to Mencken in that regard," and finally to let the reader make up his own mind.

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Like many witty people, Mencken lacked humor. Even worse, he was low on normal measures of self-awareness. On this point Mr. Yardley is acute and unsparing: "Mencken's impregnable self-confidence is, to my taste, the least appealing of his traits, suggesting as it does an incapacity for self-doubt or real self-scrutiny." Eventually more conscious of being a symbol than a man, he came to view himself as a petrified phenomenon passing into posterity on a schedule of his own choosing. (The boxes containing the memoir were opened in Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library on January 29, 1991, thirty-five years after the author's death.)

His soundest bit of self-appraisal came in a review of his activities around the time he was thirty-six: "No reasonably attentive reader of my monthly discourses, by the beginning of 1917, could be in any doubt about my fundamental ideas, which were, in the main, scientific rather than moral or aesthetic: I was in favor of the true long before I was in favor of either the good or the beautiful." He reviewed according to standards instead of theories, even if in summarizing his principal one, he chose the other word: "My central theory was that an author was entitled to choose his own manner, his own weapons. If, having made his choice, he produced a work of genuine vitality, giving a plausible picture of human life as he had seen it, and devoid of fustian and brummagem, than I was for him; but if there was any sign of falseness or affectation in him, then I was against him." On balance, if we look at his work by his own lights, we must probably be for Mencken—but also not unrelieved to board the train out of Baltimore and get the hell away.

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Notebook

Music "Behind the Scenes"

by Samuel Lipman

For almost a decade, intensive efforts have been underway to bring "quality" children's arts education to public television. From the very start, progress has been slow and not without conflict; many parties, very much including the National Endowment for the Arts, have insisted on having their say in the outcome, and on many occasions it has seemed as if no programs would ever be brought to the screen. But now, at last, some have been. This past fall, a series of ten half-hour programs, collectively entitled "Behind the Scenes" and each costing perhaps a half-million dollars to produce, appeared on PBS. This series combined "state-of-the-art" children's TV programming and all the compromises inherent in any bureaucratically administered educational enterprise. The arts subjects covered ranged from the visual arts to dance, theater, and music. Three programs of the ten were devoted to music, and it is with these music programs that I shall be concerned here.

For some years now, many voices have clamored for increased attention to education in the arts. Just why this should have been so is unclear: the past few decades have hardly been a time of artistic creation for the ages; the once secure place of the arts within civilization has been badly weakened both by the paucity of new art and the destruction of preferred status of the idea of civilization itself. And perhaps most harmful to the cause of education in the arts, or so one would have thought, has been the demand for increased scholastic attention to literacy, numeracy, and science.

But curiously, the downfall of the arts has only spurred the demand for more education. Powerful sources in philanthropy—chief among them the J. Paul Getty Trust in California—have provided funds; many wealthy people who once themselves gave large sums to art have made themselves into advocates for teaching children about the virtues of aesthetic beauty; government on every level has found that the combination of children and the arts is replete with possibilities for smarmy photo opportunities featuring politicians cheek by jowl with media celebrities. Indeed, the whole arts-education field is an area that it is very hard not to be cynical about. So many advocates, so much talk, so many high-class administrators, so many boasts; so little taught, so little learned.

The Getty initiative, emphasizing criticism, aesthetics, and history, as well as the classroom making of art, has been confined to the visual arts; in music, despite a lot of high-minded talk coming from Washington about national standards, there is now no foundation money available for traditional classroom instruction. The only current initiative seems to be based on the idea that children should be taught music by training them in some way to be composers: that is, by teaching them to "make" their own compositions, they will learn about music in some quantifiable, testable way. In this

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process, the music of the past is pretty well elbowed out in favor of what the children themselves wish to do with the various instruments (which they cannot play) and the elementary skills (which they cannot comfortably use) with which they are provided. The process I have just described may sound like total chaos, and I have no doubt that in many cases it is, but it must be recognized that underneath the seeming disorder lies a powerful professional agenda on the part of the more sophisticated specialist teachers and educational bureaucrats: the idea that the only music that counts is new music, preferably (if I may be pardoned for being a bit cynical) the music written supposedly freely by the children themselves but actually at the disguised command of the person doing the teaching.

It is into this world of contemporary music education that PBS, the NEA, several foundations (including the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation), and the McDonald's hamburger folks (the sole corporate sponsor of these programs) have now placed their three music programs. The press release announcing the entire series hardly inspired thoughts of artistic seriousness and intellectual adventure:

> "'Behind the Scenes' is a major breakthrough in arts programming for children and families," said Harry Chancey, Jr., vice president and director of Thirteen/WNET's Program Service. "This extraordinary new series makes learning fun. Penn and Teller are the perfect Pied Pipers to lead kids through the creative world of painters, dancers, musicians and actors."
>
> "Each 30-minute episode features a blend of animation, computer graphics, documentary segments, humor and magic which will help to make artistic concepts easy for children and their families to understand," said Jane Garmey and Alice Trillin, co-directors of Learning Designs and executive producers of the series . . .
>
> "Behind the Scenes" is an exciting step for us because it makes the arts accessible to families everywhere," said Stephanie Skurdy, director of Education, McDonald's Corporation. "We hope that as viewers young and old see works of art materialize before their eyes, they'll develop a real understanding of the arts, and learn to stretch their own imaginations as well."

All three programs, as is the case of the seven non-music programs, were hosted by the Mutt-and-Jeff comedy-magic team of Penn and Teller, the one (Penn) voluble, tall, plump, pony-tailed, and wearing a pendant earring, the other (Teller) small, silent, and impeccably dressed. Each program consisted of three parts: Penn and Teller patter and magic tricks, adults showing children how music presumably is "made," and a cartoon sequence in which a dog (or rather a pooch) named Aldo illustrated the concepts that the program was attempting to convey.

The first program was about melody. It explained, through the use of a primitive slide whistle and various bizarre slide-whistle offshoots, about high and low notes, silences (otherwise known as rests), and duration. Examples were chosen from folk music and the ubiquitous catchphrase from the Beethoven "Ode to Joy" in the last movement of the Ninth Symphony. A cartoon sequence showed three children using rudimentary musical notation as a means of gaining entrance to one of their homes, and to the refrigerator therein containing snacks. Alvin Toussaint, a New Orleans jazz composer, singer, and pianist, walked three children through the writing of a song, making a rather unsuccessful attempt to give the impression that the children were collaborators in his creation rather than passive onlookers or, heaven forfend, students. Aldo the pooch demonstrated his abilities at rope-twirling, thereby showing what a help variety—exemplified by twirling the rope high, low, and sideways—is to musical composition. The Prelude to Bizet's *Carmen* was used, with animation techniques employing various vegetables, to reiterate the four musical principles of the program: ideas, variation, repetition, and new ideas. The clarinettist Jane Ira Bloom and the scat singer Bobby McFerrin demonstrated various kinds of jazz im-

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provisation. Toussaint got his song put together by combining various previously taped tracks, and the program ended with the "Ode to Joy" tune played for a few seconds by something approaching a symphony orchestra.

The second music program was about rhythm. It began with children skipping rope, and then showed various other toe-tickling activities, including a coffee-maker percolating, oil-wells pumping, and a washing machine agitating its load of clothes. Penn explained that rhythm is often associated with drums, and that the program will feature the jazz drummer Max Roach; then, pointing his finger at the camera, Penn expostulated: "In this show you're going to learn every single thing there is to know about rhythm." Roach, a gifted man indeed, gave a remarkable demonstration, employing both his hands and feet, of his drumming talents. An attempt was made to explain beats and accents by a machine that ejects what appear to be large golf balls, with every few casts a piece of crockery being smashed. The inevitable rap sequence conveyed at some length the stupefying rhythmic regularity of the genre. An Indian-club juggling routine demonstrated rhythmic patterns of two, three, and four, reinforced by examples of the march, the waltz, and salsa. Again Roach showed his techniques, assigning the individual functions of his hands and feet to four children, each with only one rhythmic task to perform; the children's various bangings were then put together with Roach's sophisticated routines to demonstrate the notion of rhythmic complexity. The Blue Man Group (three men wearing blue latex stocking masks), last season's downtown club attraction for the New York middle-class suburban swinger set, made rhythmic noises by chewing and then spitting out some kind of crunchy cereal. The program ended with a jazz orchestra demonstrating its wares at seemingly interminable length.

The third program featured the orchestra. Here the attempt was to show how music can consist of many layers of sound, with, for example, several melodies going on in an orchestra at once. Here at last, one thought, was going to be a program devoted to the communication of great music. Alas, it was not to be. Penn and Teller explained layering by the principle of the sandwich: bread, mayonnaise, bacon, cheese, lettuce, etc. Penn asked, in one of the few moments of real truth in all the programs: "What does this got to do with music?" The program went on to various musical turns on "Happy Birthday," then to the Scott Joplin theme song from *The Sting*, and then to Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*. The point was then made that the one hundred musicians who make up an orchestra need a leader—a conductor. On the program the orchestra was that of the Mannes College of Music in New York City, and the conductor was JoAnn Falletta. The music chosen to illustrate the phenomenon of layering in the relation between the orchestra and its conductor was the very difficult Polka and Fugue from the Czech composer Jaromir Weinberger's fairy-tale opera *Schwanda, the Bagpipe-Player* (1927). After a few explanations from Falletta and some not very good playing from sections of the Mannes orchestra, the same process was repeated by the leader of a female pop-vocal group who showed how a recording of a song was made up of electronic tracks, separately recorded, added together by the controlling engineer. There was an excerpt, unexplained and unidentified, from the Mozart Overture to the *Magic Flute*. Suddenly Aldo the dog returned, with an excruciating-sounding ensemble of his peers, and the deadpan cartoon narrator explained to Aldo how in a canine orchestra everyone, not just the star, was important. Suddenly the program shifted from Aldo to an explanation by Falletta of the fugue (from *Schwanda*) as a musical form. Once again, the orchestral playing illustrating the points the program was trying to make was spotty. The program closed with an excerpt from yet another tacky performance of the *Schwanda* music. And with the program's last gasp, there was a final shot of Penn and Teller and conductor Falletta

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building a two-foot-high delicatessen sandwich, illustrative either (depending on your point of view) of the great age of counterpoint or the knack TV has of turning art into baloney.

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that in any traditional sense of music education these television programs were a gigantic and wildly expensive botch. Though important musical terms like fugue and polyphony were mentioned, they were incompletely, if at all, explained; though a bit of classical music was played on the first program, and rather more on the third, no difference was made between the classics and the nonce-music which occupied most of the programs' content. To the best of my knowledge, the name of no great composer was spoken, and Jaromir Weinberger, a strange choice indeed, was the only classical composer mentioned in a subtitle as his music was being played. Above all, there was no distinction drawn between better music and poorer music, between art and entertainment, between the work of geniuses and the work of amateurs.

Tragically disappointing—given the sum of money put into these programs at a time when quality music education everywhere is starved for funds—it perhaps could be said that at least these music programs did little damage. It is my impression that despite their being shown (at least in New York) on Sunday evening in prime time, they were little noticed by viewers and uncommented upon in the press. What remains of the traditional music-education community seems to have boycotted them; musicians of my acquaintance have shown no interest at all in the very fact of their existence. In remarking this, I do not mean to praise my teaching and performing colleagues: their surrender to the lowered taste of the media and to the progressive pedagogic trends of the day have only accelerated the crisis of music education.

It should be mentioned that there is supposed to be more to the programs than their mere existence as television entertainment: according to the press release announcing the series, in September, McDonald's, now so interested in transforming their hamburger diners into "family restaurants," was to

> bring "Behind the Scenes" to its Happy Meal, which will feature one of four educational toys each week and are developed from specific "Behind the Scenes" episode themes. An Animation Wheel teaches children how animation works by allowing them to view 12 continuous "cartoon" images on six paper strips. The Rub 'n' Draw templates let children create pictures by connecting art plates featuring different scenes and shapes, teaching them about perspective. The Balance Builders teach children the concept of balance via the use of colorful figures. Lastly, the Rainbow Viewer teaches children about color and color combinations. One toy will be available each week, accompanied by a different booklet with educational games and home activities.
>
> Other materials to be printed by McDonald's include a 24-page Teacher's Guide for educators to bring the series into the classroom, and a Family Viewer's Guide to help children and their parents get the most out of the series at home.

All the above material from the press release, of course, refers only to the visual-arts episodes; nothing is said in the release about any attempts at educational support for the music segments. Because none of the visual-arts educational materials mentioned in the release refers to great works of art, it is painfully likely that the musical material in the educational packets, such as it will be, will also emphasize "creation" at the expense of art, self-expression at the expense of hard work and factual knowledge. In this, music education will show itself to be no better than the rest of humanities education in America: at best blather, and at worst the corruption and destruction of a civilized heritage.

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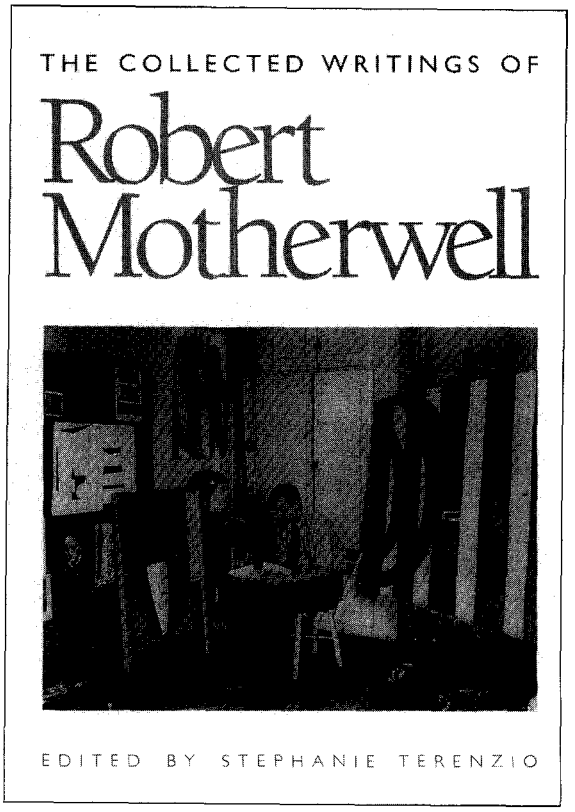

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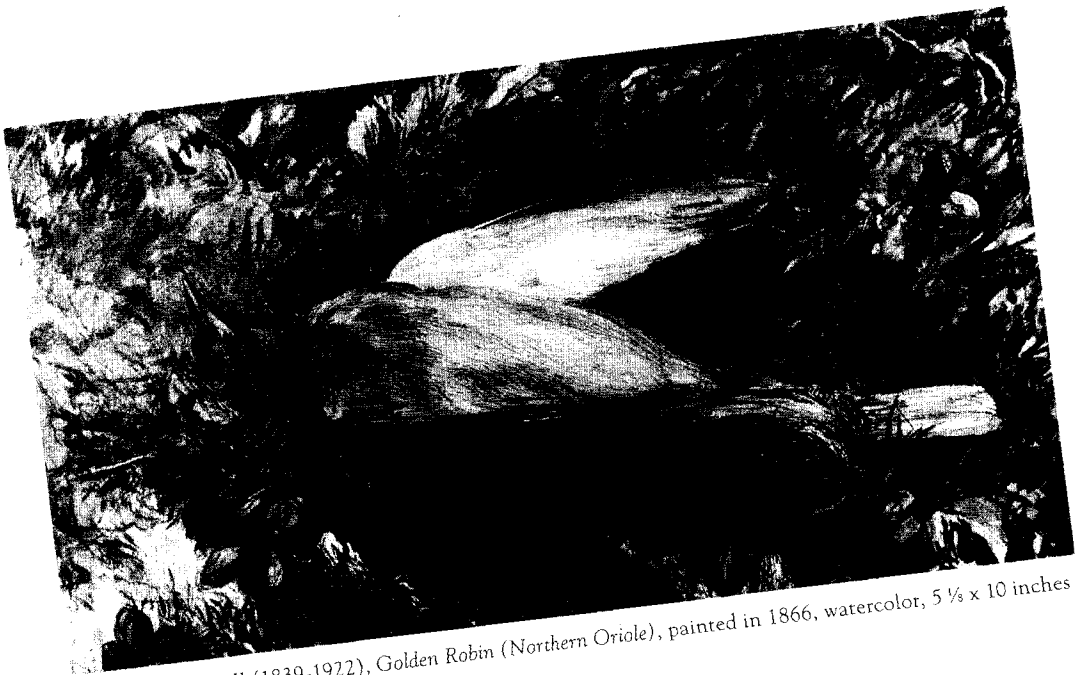

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